

The background of the cover is a photograph of a city at night, viewed from a distance. The city lights are visible as small white and yellow dots against the dark silhouettes of buildings and trees. Above the city, the sky is a deep blue and black, filled with numerous stars. The Milky Way galaxy is visible as a bright, hazy band of light stretching across the upper half of the image, with colors ranging from white to a soft purple and blue. The overall mood is mysterious and cosmic.

ATLANTIS STOLEN

A SAM REILLY
NOVEL

Christopher Cartwright

Atlantis Stolen
By
Christopher Cartwright

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Thanks very much to Cheryl my editor, and Kris, my beta-reader!

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Prologue

Dutch Trading Post, 1638.

The barren winter landscape was desolate in its beauty. While the sun approached its zenith, it did little to stop the cold stinging his weather-worn face while he worked. Albert Olsen filled his bucket with another shovel of sludge and then turned to climb the slippery crest of the muddy bank. Once on the ridge, he didn't have far to walk before he could dump its contents down the other side.

From there, Olsen saw the other islands.

A strange mixture of mud and ice stood surrounded by a river whose partially frozen mouth looked as wide as an ocean when it thawed. Not that he paid much attention to any of it as he returned to fill yet another bucket.

It was strenuous and tediously boring work, but it needed to be done so the boats could survive. And if they didn't, the little outcrop certainly wouldn't.

So the sea canals needed to be built.

They had begun as small ditches used to drain the marshland so basic farming could meet the needs of the settlement. But protecting the ships had warranted the effort to widen and deepen them to accommodate small boats, or ships at high tide.

Wrapped in a pair of thick animal hides, fur hat, and boots, even a day's shoveling did little to allay his cold. The sort of cold that sunk into your bones and didn't come out again long into the spring. Not that it bothered him much. He'd spent the last four winters working at the post, laboring for the master engineer. In another year, he would have repaid his obligation and would be allowed to return home.

He dumped another bucket over the ridge.

He'd seen that view for the past four years. He would leave after completing his obligatory service to his master, Hank Worthington, who'd been hired to build large amounts of the government's sea structures and buildings. At the age of 22, Olsen had earned enough money that he could now afford to return home and marry Frajia Clausen, the girl from his childhood dreams – that was, if she'd kept her promise.

If they let me leave.

Young laborers were hard to come by, and the council of traders would offer tremendous rewards to those who would stay on. If not, they would threaten tremendous suffering if one refused.

Olsen returned down the steep slope of the soon to be complete canal, sliding on its damp dark sides. Sticking his shovel back into the wet soil, he continued as he'd been doing for the past few weeks. He worked with a team of thirty other men – although how it could be called a team, he didn't know, as there was little order to the process. Each man dug, hauled, and dumped the soil by himself.

Next to him, Felix Brandt worked.

Although, again, he wondered if that were the right word. An older man, whom he'd guessed couldn't be any younger than 50, worked so slowly that Olsen sometimes wondered whether the man even wanted the project complete.

Olsen continued this process of filling his bucket, carrying it up the slippery edge of the canal, and then dumping it until he'd lost count of the trips he'd performed that morning. With irritation, he noticed he could easily count two or sometimes even three trips, for every one that Felix achieved.

He'd never liked the man.

It didn't make sense, why someone his age would want to come to such a place for work. Not that he'd ever given much thought about what sort of work an old man like Felix would be well suited to. After his last bucket, Olsen paused his efforts, just long enough to walk down the dike to the edge of the river bank, so that he could fill his cup with the icy cold water.

When the main river thawed, the attacks would begin again.

That's what this was all about. Hastily building, preparing, and guarding the trading post so that it could beat their attackers again, as it had done last summer, and the summer before that. The wall had been strengthened earlier in the winter, and the canals now lengthened to protect the boats. And the settlement would continue to beat them, until they lost, or someone finally discovered what he'd learned the first day he came to the island – that it's a muddy swamp, in the middle of nowhere, of little value.

The naiveté made him want to laugh. Not that it was his problem. He would be leaving soon enough. He took another drink of the water. It was so cold it stung at his throat while he drank, making him cough.

"You're slowing down, Albert." Felix dropped his bucket and climbed down to meet him at the river's edge. "Are you wearying in your old age?"

"No, just waiting for you to catch up," he replied.

"You may have to wait all day and tomorrow most likely. I'm

more than twice your age, you know.”

And Albert did know, too.

Felix slowly filled his leather bota bag. Even that, Olsen noticed, seemed to take an unusually long time. The man was slow in every task he performed. Not because he was stupid, or incompetent, but as though he simply couldn't see the point of any urgency in what he was doing.

The man seemed to be biding his time and merely waiting.

But for what?

Albert wondered why Brandt, for a man who was still laboring at his age, hadn't felt more urgency to achieve something, anything, before he was incapable of sustaining himself.

“They tell me you're leaving soon,” Felix said as he sat down by the river's edge to drink his water.

“Yes, when the river thaws, I will look for the next passage home.”

“It will be difficult with our current arrangement to obtain passage on a ship. After all, no one seems to be playing very well with others currently.”

Albert smiled, unsure if he was being reprimanded for the way he'd avoided the man. “I'm patient. I'll find my way home.”

“Why do you want to return so soon?”

“Soon? I've been here five winters already. Why wouldn't I want to leave it?”

“It seems like a nice enough island as any. Is there something waiting for you back home, though?”

Albert found himself answering before he even considered why the strange old man was interested. “There's a girl. Frajia Clausen, more perfect than anyone or anything I've ever seen. And she promised to wait for me.”

“That's very nice. That's a worthy reason to leave this place.” Felix smiled, a nearly condescending one, and then said, “But have you seen all that this world has to offer? There are some things, I dare say, far more beautiful than that girl of yours...”

Albert picked up his bucket, ready to return to the canal before he lost his ability to refrain from striking Felix. “If you'd ever met a girl like this, you too, would be quite certain there was no need to see every precious thing this land has to offer before determining that she was the most precious.”

Felix smiled. There was something unctuous and slimy about it. "Of course, of course... I'm an old man, and foolish at such matters as love. I'll tell you what I will do for you..."

Albert paused at the top of the dike. "What you will do for me?"

"I own a ship, and I have to return to Amsterdam next year. She's in the north canal. In the summer I too have to return home. You may come with me."

Albert stared at the old, worthless man, suddenly realizing his mistake. Brandt wasn't a slow working laborer. Instead, he was a wealthy landowner, who had paid for the building of the canals. He was too stunned to speak.

"Would you like that?" Felix asked.

"Yes sir, thank you very much sir. That's very kind."

"Good. Now, shall we finish this canal?"

Albert nodded and returned to the canal, ready to continue. Despite commencing work several weeks ago, today it would finally be flooded. At its bottom, a small trickle of water, no more than a few inches high could be seen, having seeped into the otherwise dry canal.

Albert continued digging with his new-found friend, Felix Brandt. Ensuring the boats that would soon call the canal home had enough water below their keels, an engineer carefully measured the depth.

The master engineer, Hank Worthington, then inspected the depth of the canal and informed them the canal would have to be dug a further foot before it could be successfully flooded.

With slow, purposeful movement of his shovel, Albert deepened the center of the canal. Water filled the spot where he dug as fast as he removed the wet soil. He continued, working harder now he knew who his slow and unwanted companion really was.

It was there that he found it.

A strange sound, like metal striking metal. It could have been another hard rock, but the sound didn't quite match up. Albert kept digging, more out of curiosity than out of any desire to get somewhere.

His shovel struck it again.

That was when he first spotted its sparkle. Below the water, half a foot under the soil, Albert saw what had made the sound. It appeared like a strange mixture of red and orange metal, but brighter, almost like gold. He worked the small device with the tip of his shovel until it came free from the earth's clasp. Pulling it out, he quickly

washed it in the muddy water. It glowed red like a strange type of gold. He quickly examined his finding.

Built like a solid rod, it was nearly half a foot in length and no more than three inches thick. At the head of the device appeared something that resembled a telescope. Only there were no pieces of glass to be seen. Instead, its sharp rectangular angles rotated so that light reflected for no apparent purpose. Strange markings, completely foreign to him, covered the sides, making it appear old. At the base, he noticed something rotate. It had twelve different positions, and each one slightly changed the angle of the reflective metal at its head.

Olsen grinned as he shuffled the artifact in his hands.

It felt heavy. More like the weight of a large axe than an ornate looking glass. It was the first time he realized it was a strange red color, ruining his hope that it was gold.

All the same, it begged the question...

Where did it come from?

Albert bent down to wash it again. Over the hill, Felix approached, slow as ever. Terrified that someone might take it from him, Albert slid his finding inside his large jacket pocket, and continued to dig, if only a little hopeful of another such discovery. But he was not so rewarded. In the high tide of that afternoon the canal was opened to the ocean. Water flooded in, and with it, all hopes he held of finding more unique riches.

That night he visited his master, who was aboard Felix Brandt's ship, preparing to return to Amsterdam in the spring.

The Delfland's rigging had been stripped for winter. Even without it, Albert could see it was a grand sailing ship, befitting a very rich landowner. Hank met him on the upper deck.

"Hello Olsen. What can I help you with?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir." He looked sheepish as he asked, "Can I come inside and talk privately?"

"Of course, young man. Come downstairs and tell me what's on your mind."

Olsen followed his master deep into the ship. Locked away since it had been stowed for the winter, the Defland still appeared fit for the King of Holland. Inside, the cold interior was expansive, more like a palace than a boat, which often required the use of every inch of her room. He was taken aft, where the master's cabin rested.

Reassured that his master was the only person aboard the ship, Albert quickly told his master of the discovery and his worry that

someone might steal it from him. When he was done, Hank lit a large candle. Then he smiled and said, "May I examine it?"

"Of course." Albert took it out of his pocket and handed it to him.

Bringing the light of the candle over the metal device, Hank took a cloth covered in strong liquor and began cleaning the orange metal. It reflected the light as powerfully as any gold that either of them had ever seen. Hank polished the device until it became reflective like a mirror. On the side of the rod a strange marking could be seen.

Albert had never seen the shapes written anywhere. Hank looked at it, mesmerized, and gasped as he saw the writings.

"Have you seen it before?"

"No, never," Hank answered, still polishing it reverently.

"Then what made you gasp when you saw the markings at its center?"

"It just looks very similar to something an old friend of mine once showed me from Africa. They were sketches of course, and clearly can have nothing to do with this... even so, the markings bear frightful similarities."

"What was so interesting about your friend's sketches?"

Hank looked torn. As though he were deciding how much to tell. Then replied, "My friend returned for a second expedition to Africa, but neither he nor any other member of his 22-man team returned."

"Do you think the two places could be connected?"

"What, an old city in Africa and here?" Hank shook his head. "I doubt that very much."

"So, can you deliver it to my fiancée? I have another 6 months of service, but I know that you are returning next month for a short while. I trust you. Can you take it for me?"

"Of course. If you trust me with something so valuable?" Hank replied, his voice reassuringly kind, like a father to a son.

"I wouldn't have come if I didn't."

"Then of course I'll do it."

*

Felix Brandt couldn't believe his eyes when he saw it as he came over the hill. Albert Olsen had found the Arcane Stone!

The child had no idea of its purpose, but even a fool must have

recognized its immediate value. And that would lead him to show it to someone, and before long, someone who knew about it, who had waited many generations to find it, would get access to its secrets.

No, Olsen was a good boy, with a bright future, but something had to be done.

Felix left his house after dark. He should have waited later, but he couldn't afford the possibility that Olsen would be innocent to such an extent that he would show someone tonight. After debating the problem over and over, he walked out into the street.

Along the rocky edge of Pearl Street, his footsteps echoed quietly into the night until he reached its end. There he turned right and walked along the Heere Gracht, where the moon shined sympathetically on the first high tide, which flooded the newly deepened canal. Soon, he thought, ships would line it as they had in Amsterdam.

At the end of the canal he reached the wall, where many of the laborers took shelter. It was unusual for a man of his background to be seen at such a place in the early evening, but as the richest man in the new settlement, he had little to fear for his actions.

He knocked on the door. Albert Olsen answered immediately. His shoes were still on and it looked as though he'd only just arrived home from somewhere.

"Hello Mr. Brandt," Olsen said, politely.

"May I come in?"

Olsen looked nervous. "Of course. Is something wrong?"

"It's all right. I just wanted to talk to you."

The room was small, with a bed at one end and a fireplace next to it. There was little more to it and nowhere to sit.

"I'm sorry I don't have much to offer you, Mr. Brandt," he said, while placing a small pot of water on the fire. "Would you like a warm drink? I'm afraid I don't have anywhere for you to sit."

"That's not a problem. I don't want to take up much of your time. I have a question for you."

"For me?" Olsen appeared confused, but Felix wondered if he detected a slight amount of fear too.

"Yes, it's about what you found today."

Olsen stopped pouring the warm water into a mug.

"What I found today?"

Felix carefully studied the man's eyes. They failed to meet his

own, and answered his question immediately.

Yes, Albert Olsen is trying to hide something.

"It's quite all right, Albert. I don't want to take it from you, if that's what you're worried about. It's just that I have a collection of local artifacts that have been discovered over the years, and I'm interested in one in particular. I have seen a number of drawings of it, and was hoping you may have stumbled upon it."

Albert kept quiet, but nor did he deny his discovery.

Felix pulled out a rolled piece of paper with a drawing and opened it in front of him. "Did it look something like this?"

Albert stared at it for a moment and said, "Yes, it's identical. Where did you get the drawing?"

"I was given it a long time ago, by someone who'd found it during an earlier expedition."

"Is it valuable?"

"Yes, of course. Not in the sense that it is made out of gold or anything like that. But historically, it is worth a fortune. I once heard it described as the key to their greatest city."

"What city? The place was a marsh before we came."

"That's not important." Felix quickly changed the topic. He'd already said too much about THEM. "Did you show it to anyone?"

"No, of course not. Something like that looked as though it could be worth more than my entire life savings! I didn't want anyone to steal it."

"Of course... You've done the right thing," he reassured Albert.

In one quick motion Felix slid the tip of the knife through the gap between Albert's ribs and into his heart. It was as quick a death as could be contrived. A lifetime of training, and he'd never had the need to do so before.

Albert barely made a sound.

Felix wasn't a born killer. And he took no pleasure in it. He stared at the boy's face. Aghast, he noticed there was no hatred in Albert's eyes and no pain, simply absent disbelief. Felix wanted more than anything to relieve the child from his anguish.

"I'm so sorry Albert, really I am," Felix said. "But some things, I'm afraid, were supposed to remain buried – forever."

*

Hank Worthington watched as the fifth marker pole was driven

deep into the ground below the shallow water, forty feet out from the bank of the river. Today was the first day of the process of reclaiming the land from the sea, so that the man paying his wages could have his mansion built on prime real estate.

It wasn't an entirely new idea for the Dutch, but on the outlying Trading Post, where land was plentiful, the return compared to labor required to achieve the task made it seem fanciful. Hank looked up, having heard the familiar sound of hammer on steel as the wooden marker pole was driven into the soft soil below until it struck bedrock. Tomorrow his team would begin the laborious task of backfilling the water below with rock and then soil.

He shook his head at its absurdity.

Built like a dike, and doubling as a fortress to guard the entrance to the main canal, which Mr. Brandt too had commissioned, the expansion onto the river seemed outlandish, even to him. And Hank was a 3rd generation master water engineer, whose family had been employed on a number of water projects in Amsterdam. But this was different.

"Felix Brandt is a fool," he said out loud.

"Yes, but a very rich one," his apprentice agreed.

"They're the worst kind." Hank pulled out the engineering plans to show his young apprentice. "Ordinarily, we would have supported this point here, where the natural bank of the river formed and then built his fortress above it, where it could still protect the entrance to the canal."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because Felix Brandt was specific. This spot, right here. He even took me out in a rowboat and showed me precisely where he wanted the new land to reach."

His apprentice looked at the map depicting the landfill areas. "He wants a lot of new land? There's nearly a square mile of it! I wonder why he doesn't simply build further back. It's not like land around here is scarce or valuable?"

"Indeed. Why not?" Hank waited for the boy to come up with an answer on his own. When none came, he said, "Felix gave some stupid excuse that he would then one day own the greatest amount of deep waterfrontage on the island, and therefore could command its trade." Hank gave a supercilious smile and then continued, "But I think he did so simply to prove that what he wants, he can have."

Out on the water, the familiar chime of hammer on steel continued as the sixth pole commenced being driven into the deeper

water below.

Hank's ears piqued to the sudden change in resonance.

That pole driver struck something other than sand, rock or wood. But what?

From the shore he watched as the men withdrew the wooden pole and attempted to reset it. By the third attempt, one of his men dived down to see what they had struck. The big man who'd entered the water climbed back onto the barge after holding his breath for nearly a minute.

Hank looked at the man's face. Even from forty feet away, he could see that something was wrong. "Come with me. Let's go see what the problem is."

"I'll get the rowboat."

The two climbed into the small boat and his apprentice took the oars. Within a couple minutes they were tying up alongside the barge.

"What have we got?" Hank asked, taking the outstretched leathery hand of Jeroen, who was driving the piers. The two had worked together for nearly twenty years.

"We hit something hard. There's no way we're going to be able to drive anything through it."

"That's fine. We'll build over it anyway." Hank looked at Jeroen's clothes, still dripping wet. "You've had a look. What have we struck?"

Jeroen looked nervous as he handed him a small ingot of orange metal. It could have been brass or even a copper alloy.

"You found it down there?"

"Yes. But I have no idea where it's come from. There's a lot of it down there. I think its best if you have a look for yourself."

Hank looked at the water. It wasn't quite spring and the ice had only recently thawed. He was going to say something but Jeoren stopped him.

"Trust me, you're gonna want to see this."

Not wanting to spend the rest of his day arguing over whatever the hell his men had found, he took his shirt off and dived into the water. The icy temperature stung him, but he forced his eyes open as he swam toward the bottom. It wasn't deep. Maybe twenty or thirty feet at most. His head barely dipped the surface before he saw it.

It looked like the center of an old city. But nothing like any city he'd ever seen, or even heard of. And it was covered in the same

orange colored, bright, metal that young Albert Olsen had discovered while digging in the canal. The entire place had the surreal appearance of a lost Egyptian city. Not that he'd ever seen one of those either. A friend of his had shown him sketches after visiting there when they were both students.

Hank returned to the surface and climbed the rope ladder onto the barge.

He could see Jeroen's face – waiting to say 'I told you so.'

"Well Hank, what do you make of that?"

"I'd better go to the owner with this one..." Hank said, without hiding the disgruntlement from his voice. "And that will mean delays."

*

An hour later, Hank returned to the worksite. On the beach, a tent had been set up with a desk at its center - an office for himself and the architect. To the north it was protected from the wind by large piles of rock and soil in preparation for the build. Sitting opposite his desk, Jeroen and his apprentice waited for him. A glance at their faces told him they had both been waiting in expectation.

He was still carrying the strange piece of orange metal when he came into the small worksite office, and sat down, placing it on the table as he would a paperweight – and said nothing.

"Well Hank, what did Mr. Brandt have to say?" Jeroen asked.

Hank cracked his knuckles together. "He says it's the remains of the India Star, an old brass lined ship of war, dumped here years ago to stop the never-ending erosion to the beach."

Jeroen laughed at the explanation.

"That's bullshit and you know it as well as I do. That looked like a city to me."

Hank met his eyes, and forcefully replied, "Yeah, well maybe it was one of 'their' old cities, before we came. Now it's ours, so why shouldn't we build on top of it? It looks pretty solid to me."

"I don't care if it was one of 'their' cities." Jeroen lit a pipe. "Heck, some of that red metal stuff must be worth something?"

"Yeah, well maybe Mr. Brandt isn't too keen on slowing down his project while we all go archeological on his building site. Besides, so what if it is? All the better for building on. Anything that solid must make for a good foundation."

"So, then, what are we going to do with it?"

“The owner says backfill with rocks and soil, lay the foundations, and prepare for stage two of the building.”

“And that’s what you’re planning on doing?”

“Like I said, it’ll make good foundations.”

Jeroen stood up to leave and then said, “Hank...”

“Leave it alone Jeroen. I said it’s time to go back to work. I want this place buried by the end of the week.”

That night, Hank drank whiskey quietly in his own tent. Ordinarily he’d have been happy to have one with his men, but he needed the time to think this one through. Something in the back of his mind kept reminding him of the damn copper-colored ingot. He’d never seen anything glow like that. It was almost a type of orange gold.

Besides, it didn’t make sense how the owner responded. Mr. Brandt was an extremely wealthy man, but that was no reason not to become wealthier. He’d bought the water lots fair and square. If there was an ancient golden city below, he could have easily claimed ownership.

So, why had he been so quick and adamant to bury the lot of it? What didn’t he want the rest of the world to see?

It was too much for him, and in the end, Hank knew he needed to have a more satisfactory answer. Returning to his work tent where he’d left the orange ingot as a good paperweight, Hank grabbed the strange metal, put it in his pocket and walked towards the steel forge, where men were working through the night to create the steel required for the new outpost.

As the leading engineer, Hank was known by everyone who greeted him cordially, though surprised to see him there in the night. At the back of the room he examined the ingot. It was definitely made from the same strange glowing metal used in the artifact that Albert Olsen had discovered.

He shook his head, still wondering at the young man’s sudden disappearance. It wasn’t like someone had killed him for it – after all, Olsen had already entrusted the artifact with himself before he disappeared. Perhaps, he had never intended on returning to Frejia, and this was the best apology he could find? First weighing it, he discovered that it was precisely 250 ounces. He then placed it inside the crucible and started the furnace. And watched as the strange metal smelted until it glowed with fire and liquefied.

Zinc and lead were the first to go, being weak metals.

He then poured off the liquid while the stronger metals, being

gold, silver and copper, remained in a solid form.

With a gloved hand he picked up the blacksmith's pincers and gripped the small clump of shiny metal so that he could examine it. Not much had changed in its weight. He weighed it to be sure. 240 ounces.

He became excited by the prospect of 240 ounces of gold, silver and copper. But the question remained: in what proportions were they?

Hank then took a small bottle of Glaubers Salt, a recently discovered strong acid that would dissolve silver and copper, but leave gold untarnished, and poured it into the crucible.

Again, the gold remained solid, while the other two elements turned into a weak sludge.

He carefully removed the sludge and heated the gold once more to remove any additional impurities, and then examined the glowing remaining metal. It certainly looked like pure gold. He might not have all of it, but it was close.

Gripping it with the Blacksmith's pincers, he dipped it in water, watching it hiss.

Impatiently, he then picked it up.

It felt heavy in his hand and his heart raced as he placed it back on the scales. Holding his breath, he added lead weights to the opposite end of the scale, until the two metals were balanced.

He totaled the tiny weights and nearly screamed.

175 ounces!

He did the arithmetic in his head.

Holy shit! That's nearly 70% gold!

And there's a buried city below his construction site covered in the stuff. Buried for eternity.

He returned to his master's locked ship.

A sudden sense of urgency led him to quickly open his safe and examine the artifact that Albert Olsen had asked him to deliver. At the time he'd dismissed the markings as being unlikely similarities, but now he was certain that they were one and the same as those his old college friend had spoken about.

The instant he saw it he knew they were.

So, he was telling the truth all those years ago.

Robert Mitchel had discovered an ancient tribe in Africa that knew the way to the Golden City!

Hank stared at the gold in front of him.

He was going to be rich beyond his dreams. All he had to do was work out how he was going to steal it without Felix Brandt's entire fortress caving in on him. In the delusion of happiness, which the allure of gold often provided, Hank didn't even stop to consider why Felix was so determined to bury it all.

He was going to be rich.

Hank recalled the conversation with his old friend, Robert Mitchel, all those years ago. And then prayed that the second part of the man's story never came true.

Chapter One

Amsterdam, Present Day – Five Weeks Remaining

Dr. Billie Swan turned left onto Amselstraat and then right onto Weeperstraat taking the shortest route out of the old city, over the maze of canals and dikes. She drove a Renault Twingo, the four door version of the tiny European car. Hired for the week, she'd expected it to take at least that long to find the answer to her question.

Instead, she'd found it on her third day.

In her rear view mirror she saw a yellow Vespa. It had been following her since leaving the Stadsarchief Amsterdam – the National Archives Center. It *could* have been taking the same route as her. It was the fastest way out of the city.

But had she seen it yesterday?

Europe was rife with such mopeds, and she could be easily forgiven for mistaking a different one, which followed her now, as one and the same.

Her nerves had been on edge since she'd returned from Atlantis.

Billie hadn't even worked out the entire truth. If her predictions were even close to the mark, then the world was in trouble. And based on the calculations of time, she didn't have long to work out a solution. Maybe as little as five weeks.

Time was running out – fast.

They say knowledge can be a dangerous thing. For what Billie had learned, it could spell the end of the human race. The only hope she had left was to reach the inner sanctum of Atlantis in time to stop the next cycle from being triggered. And to do that, she needed to find the code.

Hell, if she had years, maybe a team of code breakers might be able to solve it, but she didn't. She had five weeks. Her only hope now was to find the notes of the last living person known to have seen it.

Felix Brandt.

For that, she needed to find where he'd spent his final days on earth. And that was what had taken her so rapidly to Amsterdam.

The truth was so dangerous that she had refused to tell Sam Reilly or even Tom Bower about it. Instead, she'd made up a story why she needed their help to find someone in Amsterdam. Now she'd found where the man had gone centuries ago, she would need their help to reach him, or at least where he put his notes.

HIM...

The thought brought her back to the man with curly blond hair and blue eyes she'd seen on her first day in the national archives. The blond man in the red baseball cap on the moped – today wasn't the second time she'd seen him. He'd been there – at Stadsarchief Amsterdam – on her first day. She hadn't taken much notice of the man. He was entering the building while she was leaving. The only reason she'd taken any was something strangely attractive about his face. Beneath his looks, he had an outward sign of self-assuredness which bordered on arrogance. And then, as though he'd read her thoughts, he'd responded with the most disarming smile – the sort that could easily cause a woman less driven by necessity to inadvertently find herself in his bed.

So that makes three times in three days.

That's more than a coincidence.

He was after her.

And that meant she was in trouble... and the world was at great risk.

It was time to let Sam Reilly know what she'd really discovered in Atlantis. At the same time, even more important than ever that she not disclose its location.

Billie touched her brakes slightly harder than required as she came around the corner leaving the city. To the other drivers of the busy motorway, the action might have appeared to be entirely accidental, but it was enough to cause the familiar moped to swerve to the right of her, forcing its rider to overtake.

The license plate came into clear view.

It was different.

She had written it down as a precaution yesterday, when she noticed the motorcycle arrive and depart the National Archives building at the same time as herself. Even without checking her notes, she was able to immediately recognize that the two weren't the same. Even so, it didn't alleviate the uncomfortable sensation that she was being followed.

To her dismay, the moped slowed until she was forced to overtake it again.

That's it. I'm not playing this game!

She stopped the car, pulling over into a break down lane. Opening a large foldout map – as though she were one of the thousands of lost tourists – she watched as the Vespa disappeared.

Relieved, she refolded the map, and was about to drive off again, when an entirely new Vespa appeared.

Unlike the previous rider, who had worn a full faced helmet with an impenetrable reflective visor, making him or her appear sinister, this Vespa was red and the rider had long blonde hair, which hung carelessly out of the rider's open faced helmet, and a beautiful young Dutch girl's smile.

Hardly the face of a person trying to spy...

The rider pulled onto the footpath behind her. Despite the complete differences of the two riders, there was no mistaking the coincidence that another Vespa should park behind her within minutes of losing the last one.

So, someone is following me.

She entered the traffic, not wanting to draw attention to herself.

"Call Sam," she said, activating the voice recognition in the car.

"Did you find what you were after?" Sam asked, dismissing civilities.

"Sam, I don't know how, but someone's onto us."

"Really, no one even knows we're in the country, and I can't imagine how they would have worked out what we're doing here. Especially, given that I don't really know what we're doing."

"All the same, someone knows. I've had several men on Vespas stalking me since I left the National Archives building."

"No chance they just want your phone number?"

"Fuck you. I'm telling you someone's after me."

Sam's voice stiffened. "Where are you now?"

She looked at the GPS on the heads up display on the windscreen. "Weeperstraat. Approaching... Mauritskade..."

"Good. I want you to take a right onto it. And then loop around to the Frederik Hendrik Park. Do you know how to get there?"

"Yeah, sure. I think I've passed it a few times in the past few days," she replied.

"Stay on the main roads. If I'm not there when you arrive, make a circuit. I can be there in twenty minutes. And Billie..."

"What?"

"Did you find it?"

"Yes. I couldn't steal it without someone taking notice, but I've taken several photographs. It should be enough to find where he's

gone.”

“Good. Listen. Stick to the main roads, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Don’t stop your car until you see me!”

“Understood!”

Billie’s heart raced as she reached the Frederik Henderik Park within ten minutes. She slowed, but the park was empty. She was too early for Sam to reach it. The first time since she’d arrived in the city that the traffic had been so good, when all she wanted was a slow but constant run.

In general, she could look after herself, but she was unarmed. She swore at herself for not taking the precautions she normally did, but she’d worried that her weapon was more likely to raise suspicion than dispel it. Besides, whoever knew what she was after would have infinite resources behind them. Few people knew that Atlantis really existed. Even fewer knew where it was. And as far as she could determine, no one presently living knew how to reach its inner sanctum.

But she was about to find out.

And that made her the most valuable person alive.

Billie turned right onto Willemsbrug and began the mental process of planning a gigantic loop. The girl on the Vespa behind her seemed more serious now. The carefree smile had disappeared, only to be replaced by determination.

The motorcycle rider, seemingly aware that Billie was onto her, became blatant in her movements to keep close. She laughed at herself for being so frightened. After all, they were only on motorcycles, Vespas actually, not even a real motorcycle, and she was in a car.

What were they going to do to her?

When she made another right back onto Weeperstraat, Billie was horrified to see the original yellow Vespa, the one that had followed her to the National Archives on her first day. It was parked on the intersection coming the other direction, but immediately turned in pursuit as she passed it.

She sped up as the yellow Vespa followed.

Billie pressed the call back button on her cell.

“Sam! Where are you?”

“Zaandam. I got stuck in traffic, but I’m doing my best. Are you all right?”

“No, I’m not fucking all right! I have three motorcyclists after me, and I’m unarmed because of your suggestion!”

Sam didn't take the bait for the argument. "Well I'm not unarmed. I can assure you they'll lose whatever interest they have in you pretty quickly when I arrive. Take it easy. Are you still on the same loop?"

"Yes."

"Good. Don't stop anywhere. I'll find you. I'm coming from the other direction, but I'll see you. Good luck."

"Fuck good luck! I want you to fix this, Sam!"

"I'll be there in five minutes."

Up ahead, Billie saw a light turn red.

She began slowing down early, hoping that she wouldn't have to come to a complete stop. Traffic was already building up at the intersection and she was worried it wouldn't be long before she didn't have a choice.

In the end, she had to stop.

She kept one foot on the brake, while the other revved the engine, ready to cross into the oncoming traffic if she needed to.

The yellow Vespa pulled up alongside her.

It was the same blond man who had been watching her at National Archives in Amsterdam. He wore an open faced helmet. He turned his head to look directly at her. The arrogant smile across his face made him look like any other man who was out for a great ride and had come across a beautiful woman stopped at the traffic lights.

Her eyes carefully kept track of the two Vespas behind her, now stopped a couple car spaces back. Certain that someone was going to get off their bike and take her she didn't let her eyes stop scanning the area.

Billie hit the central lock button and all four doors locked simultaneously.

It failed to reassure her. The car was small and would do little in the way of protecting her from bullets.

The traffic light turned green.

And the man in the yellow Vespa grinned at her and waved, before speeding off ahead until he disappeared into the sea of traffic.

Well that's something...

She was starting to feel more confident that Sam was going to reach her in time. Up ahead, she approached the intersection of Willemsbrug and Stadhouderskade.

Approaching the intersection, Billie was forced to slow down, as

a man on a bicycle in front of her nearly came to a stop. Her eyes carefully monitored the closest Vespa behind her. Reassured that it wasn't moving, she remained in the intersection for a split second longer than she should have after the bicycle had crossed the road.

She then floored her accelerator and pulled into the intersection.

Where a truck drove toward her at full speed.

By the time she saw it, Billie had just enough time to hit her accelerator in a vain attempt to avoid the collision. The truck struck the passenger side door, sending her forward and towards the wall of the dike.

After the initial impact, she realized she wasn't badly injured. Deciding whether to run toward the truck driver or make a run for it down the street, she was about to reach for the door handle when the truck's engine roared into life again.

It was pushing her toward the bridge.

She slammed her foot hard on the brake.

The side of her car struck the old stone wall with a jarring force. And then she felt everything give way as her car began rolling down the edge.

Until she struck water!

It floated for thirty or more seconds before the heavier engine block at the front of the car began dragging her down hood first.

With a gush of bubbles, the entire car disappeared under the water.

Chapter Two

Sam Reilly spun his BMW S1000 RR, one of the fastest road bikes in existence, south along the A10 at speeds that would make any police officer doubt his vision. Cutting through the backstreets of Houthavens he reached the intersection of Willemsbrug and Stadhouderskade.

He came to a stop at the intersection.

Broken glass and shards of metal were strewn along the middle of the intersection. A long stretch of tire marks could be seen skidding along the bridge. Starting in the middle, his eyes followed them until they went over the edge of the old bridge.

He was too late.

They had got to her first.

Sam pulled his throttle all the way back as he raced to the edge of the bridge where the remnants of the destroyed railing still remained.

Below him, he could see a thousand or more bubbles still piercing the surface of the water, and an eerie glow from the headlights of the car below. Presumably the only remnants of Billie's crashed car.

It must have only just happened.

Sam then stepped off his bike and looked over at the broken large sandstone blocks, which had previously formed the top layer of retaining wall. Without waiting to see who else had been there at the accident, he lifted up one of the large blocks. It took all his strength just to lift the sandstone. He took a single step to the edge of the bridge and stepped off – into the white, frothing water below.

Chapter Three

Billie opened her eyes to the sight of bubbles running along the windscreen. Her hand touched her forehead. There was something wet running past her eyes. Slightly disoriented, she pulled her hand back, and looked at it.

There was blood.

Where am I?

In an instant, she recalled what had happened and where she was. Dazed for a moment, she quickly reached for the door handle. It didn't move. She tried the unlock button, but the door wouldn't budge.

She tried the electric windows.

Nothing happened.

Adrenaline raged inside her as the realization that she was going to drown inside her own car terrified her. She thought through all the ways she'd read over the years to exit a flooded car – there weren't many that worked.

Billie fumbled as she rummaged through the glove box, desperately looking for anything solid enough to break a window.

Tissue box – *are you fucking kidding me!*

She squeezed into the back seat. Her shoulder bag rested there. She opened it and riffled through the contents. Her cell phone, wallet, and tablet. She cursed herself for leaving her laptop in the trunk today, instead of with her handbag next to her.

Car keys, all plastic. *No, that won't help.*

The water was filling the car faster now.

Panic tried to grip her, and she fought to maintain control. If she was to survive, she was going to have to stay focused.

The water was now up to her neck.

With the downward angle of the car, the remaining air pocket was sitting at the back window. She tried to squeeze her head into the top to breathe the last remaining air. Trying the door handle again, she found the pressure outside was too great.

Billie returned to the back of the car and took another couple deep breaths, and then swam to the driver's side door and tried to open it.

Still too much pressure.

She returned to take a final breath from the last pocket of air at the back window, before it completely filled with water.

Now's the time.

I have to stay conscious long enough for the pressure to equalize.

A loud crunching sound told her that the car had struck the shallow seabed. Below her, Billie thought she could hear another crack on the window at the driver's door. She swam down to the front door, where the car was now completely filled with water.

At the window, a masked man stared back at her.

Covered in a black wetsuit, tinted facemask, and SCUBA gear, there was something oddly familiar about the man. He could have been any diver, but there was something else she recognized from her past. Where, she could not place.

He smiled, and she recognized it.

It seemed sinister somehow, and she remembered where she'd seen it before.

The man tried to open the door, but the pressure was still too great. Holding her breath, Billie moved to the back doors as the diver continued to fight his way into her car. She hoped the pressure would equalize and she could escape through the back door while he came through the front.

The diver looked as though he realized what she was thinking at the same time. It gave him additional strength, and after fighting one more time with the door, he slammed his elbow into the window, sending a crack right across it.

For a moment, Billie thought the window would hold.

Then he struck it again with his elbow, breaking through the window completely. She watched the man remove the last shards of the window quickly, as he tried to squeeze through.

Billie perched her back on the floor of the rear seats and pushed with legs against the back door as hard as she could. It didn't budge on the first attempt, and she was already losing focus as the effects of hypoxia attacked her brain.

She held onto the door handle and kicked it again.

This time, the water pressure had equalized, and the door flung open. She turned to swim out. But her head was stuck on something, and as her world darkened, she began to lose the direction of the surface.

Disoriented and frustrated, she felt the calm that often came before one accepted their death in drowning. It wasn't that she'd given

up, simply a matter of accepting that she'd failed despite her best efforts.

As her lungs burned with pain and desire, she opened her mouth to take a deep breath of ocean water – and discovered a diving regulator being shoved inside her mouth by a large gloved hand.

She involuntarily took a deep breath.

It tasted sweeter than air – almost sugary -- but it soothed the pain in her chest, so she continued to take long deep breaths. By the third, everything seemed to go funny again, and then the world went dark.

What has he given me?

And with the fourth breath, all the worries of the world disappeared.

Chapter Four

With the heavy landscaping block in his arms, Sam sank to the seabed below. Billie's Renault Twingo could be seen resting on the sandy bottom. A few remaining bubbles dribbled out. The trunk had been opened, as though she had thought to remove her laptop. The information inside was worth millions of dollars.

Sam reached the front door.

Its window had been broken. He scanned the area to see if he could spot Billie, but there was nothing but murky water. He opened the door to make certain she wasn't stuck inside. The passenger compartment was empty, the glovebox open, and the back door on the other side half ajar.

Thank God, she got out!

He dropped the heavy block and then quickly swam to the other side of the car to see if he could see her. Again, nothing. He checked the sand below to make sure he hadn't missed her, and then calmly swam to the surface, feeling confident they had been lucky.

It was a wakeup call that their exploits to reach Atlantis were being pursued by others, but at least she'd survived. And now they would be much more cautious.

Sam broke the surface of the water with his head and breathed deeply. On the surface, he quickly looked around, expecting to see Billie swimming towards the bank of the dike. But he couldn't see her in the water. He rotated three hundred and sixty degrees, trying to find her.

Sam was the only person in the water.

He looked towards the edge of the water, and scanned the faces of the several bystanders who still looked worried.

She wasn't amongst them.

"Did anyone come up?" he yelled at them.

Most people ignored his question, either because they didn't speak English, or didn't know the answer.

"Please, there was a woman in this car! Did anyone see her come up from the water below?"

A man looked straight at him and said, "No, sir. I saw her crash, but I have not seen her surface the water."

Sam ignored the man's response and immediately dived below again.

Frantically, he examined the car from a new perspective. He saw it this time. The front driver's window had been smashed from the outside. The rear passenger door remained opened and undamaged, giving the impression she'd escaped through it.

Had someone else come in after her?

Before he'd thought anymore, he knew that he was right. Sam carefully scanned the area around them, looking for any signs of whoever took Billie.

There was nothing.

He returned to the surface, swam to the edge and got back on his motorcycle. There, he picked up his cell phone and hit the call button.

"Tom, we have a problem. They got to her."

Chapter Five

Andrew Brandt looked at the woman beneath him.

Despite approaching forty, her skin was delicate as it was white and smooth. Her blue eyes stared at him with wanton desire. Her ordinarily demure smile now contorted in pursed lips as she began to cry out in pleasure.

And the woman did cry out in pleasure, as he knew she would.

It began more like a whimper, and then in response to the horror of her own base desire, than the ecstasy of love. Frightened by her inability to control her bodily needs as he showed her exactly what her body was capable of. Her face, aghast in abject desire, unbearable pleasure, and split between the guilt and shame of it all.

Sarah tried to look away, unable to hide her shame.

Or her need.

When he was done with her he climbed out of bed, leaving her still writhing around, naked and insatiable.

“Come back to me!” she begged.

“I have a meeting. I must get ready.” He made no apology for her frustration.

Andrew Brandt examined himself in the mirror.

Despite his rigorous exercise this morning, his face displayed no sign of the exertion. There was no sweat, his cheeks weren’t flushed, and he breathed calmly.

There was something hard about his face, as attractive as it was frightening. His hair blond, and groomed so that not even a single strand fell out of place. His eyes were grey, and piercing in their intelligence and power. A cleft chin broke his strong jaw line. Years of practice had allowed him to develop an unreserved smile, which could be used to disarm another’s temper or mistrust instantly. It was entirely fake, but then, the best were.

If eyes really were the windows to the soul, his would show a man willing to stop at nothing to achieve his every desire.

And what he desired most was power.

In another hour he would meet the buyer and make the final arrangements to complete the transaction. At a price of 100 million dollars U.S., he had no intention of making even the slightest mistake. Even to him, that amounted to a massive financial windfall.

He had a short shower, followed by a long shave as he delicately

groomed himself and considered all the things that such money could afford.

Luxuries, women, power...

He was born into luxury, although he'd worked hard to improve on the fortune that his father had left him. As for women, Andrew could have as many as he wanted. However, it wasn't just the amount, but the type.

Like Sarah Clausen, whom he'd just seduced.

The daughter of the billionaire, Edward Worthington, who was the reclusive CEO of Worthington Enterprises, the multi-billion-dollar start-up tech firm. While her old man held the title, most people saw her as the brains and poster child of the company. Unknown to the rest of the general public, or even most employees, Worthington's was about to make an announcement. Andrew knew what that announcement was going to be, but it was the date of it that was going to make him very rich.

And for that, he needed Sarah's help.

Sarah was what he considered a typical heiress to a fortune. Groomed by tutors, educators, linguists and other specialists since birth, she was the product of the education that only that sort of money could buy. She'd gone on to become Dux at Cambridge University when she studied law. Now, at the age of 40, a control freak in herself and a self-pronounced feminist, she'd managed to avoid romantic relationships all of her life. When he first studied her, Andrew was momentarily worried that she was gay, but further scrutiny showed her to be a workaholic, with standards set much too high for any honest man to meet. Fortunately, he was as dishonest as a man could be. Currently, she served as senior legal counsel to her father's company.

That's what brought her into his life.

He could take a strong woman for such money and make her weak. Money in itself buys whores, but 100 million dollars buys power. And with that sort of power, you could take a strong woman, strip her of everything she has, and reduce her to nothing but a cheap whore, and inflame her with lust that betrays her own dignities. He felt himself stiffen again at the thought. Sex for him had little to do with physical attraction, and everything to do with power.

He donned his tailored suit, with matching blue neck tie.

An Oxford graduate with a Master of Business Administration, Andrew had worked at the Bank of England for nearly a decade before opening his own Merchant Bank. He now earned more in a day than

most did in a lifetime. He specialized in unique acquisitions, which were as varied as they were expensive. He specialized in convincing people to sell before they knew they even wanted to.

Some of his previous transactions included such wonderful items as a nuclear submarine for a private buyer, the secret plans for a new type of hydrogen engine, new pharmacological products, and the remains of one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

For the most part, his transactions were perfectly legal, so long as he didn't get caught, on the international playing field that he worked. Some projects more so than others.

Today's acquisition was on the dangerous end of that scale, and completely destroyed any pretense of legitimacy.

He looked at his watch, an old Rolex. It was ten minutes past nine in the morning. It would be in his possession by now. The thought made him think about his acquisition. He smiled happily.

With a 100-million-dollar price tag, the risk versus benefit had convinced him that he was making the right investment. And after all, that was the only way that a real businessman could look at his transactions. It wasn't a matter of being moral or ethical, instead, he saw everything as risk versus benefit. In this case, he could amass an even greater fortune for a few day's work and minor risk, or he could be caught, and spend the rest of his life in jail, or worse, depending on the country of capture, end up shot by firing squad.

When the request was first made from the buyer, he had said that he'd hate to put a price tag on a person's life. But then, when the buyer threw out the figure, he was confident such a price covered it.

He checked his watch again.

It was 9:15.

He should have heard by now.

Andrew walked toward his private lift. Sarah remained on his bed, sensually lying on her side, naked as the day she was born, a look of pleasure mingled with guilt abjectly painted on her face.

He smacked her bare ass, and she turned around and sat up immediately.

"Hey, that hurt, you asshole!"

He ignored her complaint. "Sarah, I need something from you."

"Anything for you Andrew."

"Good, I'm going to need the precise date your father's going to release his statement."

She sat up, looking serious for the first time that day. "You know about the development?"

"Of course I do. Why did you think I seduced you?"

A frown crossed her face, and for a moment, Andrew thought she was going to cry. He'd not expected that of her.

The thought made him happy.

"You planned this entire thing, because you wanted to know when my father's going to come out with the news on Worthington Enterprises?"

"That's right," Andrew said cheerfully.

She frowned. "That's what this was about, wasn't it? You never loved me? You wanted to know protected information."

"Yes."

"Well you can get fucked. I won't do it. Besides, do you realize that you and I could both go to prison if we were even caught talking about such things? Don't you know what that sort of information will cause on the stock exchange?"

"Insider trading at its grandest scale!" he replied.

She laughed.

"Of course you do. And with the amount of money I'm sure you could move on it, the investigators would quickly track it down to me. So no, you can find another whore to fuck!"

She went to slap him, but he caught her hand. There was no way he was going to let her, a woman, strike him in the face.

"Here Sarah, have a look at these pictures I had taken last night specifically to remember you by. I wonder what all those trashy mags would think about publishing these images of the world's richest and most prominent feminist."

Sarah dipped her head as she scanned the pictures he placed in front of her.

Andrew saw with more than a little pleasure, that it was the third picture that made her realize her mistake. It wasn't being tied spread-eagled, or the marks on her wrists and back from where she'd struggled that had done it for her.

No, it was the image of her face begging for him. A suppliant resolution that she'd accepted her fate, as the weaker sex.

To be abused.

He looked at her beautiful face. There were tears in her eyes and she looked miserable, but there was something else too. He thought

he'd imagined it at first, but the more he examined her countenance the more he realized it was there. It was relief. She had been in control her entire life, and he'd made her lose it.

"It's August, the 23rd."

There were tears in her eyes.

"Good."

Andrew looked at his security guard who'd walked into the room. "Trent, please see this woman out."

Sarah quickly attempted to get dressed while the security guard grabbed her.

"Oh, and Sarah..."

"What?"

"I'll be in town again in two weeks."

She stared at him, understanding slowly dawning on her.

"You will come to me." A Machiavellian grin crossed his face. "In the meantime, I forbid you to touch yourself."

"Yes, master."

Chapter Six

Andrew Brandt caught his private elevator to his secure carpark, ten stories below his One Hyde Park penthouse. It was currently the world's most expensive and overinflated piece of real estate. He would have to start making his way to meet the buyer.

In his car, he switched his cell on.

Andrew didn't believe in the concept that cell phones were invented so that people could maintain constant contact. He had kept a strict policy of being contactable during specific business hours or prearranged times outside of those hours.

After returning home from his work in Amsterdam the day before, he'd picked Sarah up. She fell into the category of business, even though he didn't entirely dislike the prospect of seducing her. His business was to be with her, and for that, he did not want interruptions.

His smartphone came up with two messages:

Something's wrong.

Call me.

It was Alex, one of the operatives he'd used in Amsterdam.

Andrew relaxed into the seat of his Bentley.

It was going to be a long day.

He then pressed 'call Alex.

"Do we have the product?" Andrew asked.

"No. Someone else kidnapped her before we could do so. It happened yesterday."

"Yesterday? I saw her yesterday. Do you know who?"

"No, but we'll keep trying. It's not like they're going to get her out of here without us noticing. We have all local airports, marine ports, railway stations, and bus lines covered."

Andrew looked out the window, temporarily distracted by the conversation, and then said, "The buyer's not going to be happy."

"There's something else that you might want to know, too..."

"What?"

"She had new information about Atlantis."

"You've got to be kidding me. HE was after Atlantis?" Andrew looked at a cat running across the road. He accelerated carelessly, seeing if he could hit the creature.

“It appears so.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“We stole her laptop from the trunk of her car. It was riddled with images of the Arcane Stone and what she had to do to use it.”

“Really?” Andrew grinned with the surprising new development. “Okay, send the message out, call in all sleeper cells around the world. The Phoenix Resistance are going to have their first meeting for the millennium.”

It wasn't every day that two of his projects collided.

Chapter Seven

Tom Bower burst into Sam's hotel room.

It had taken him less than twelve hours to catch a flight across the Atlantic as soon as he'd found out about Billie.

"How the hell did you let them do this to her?"

"It wasn't my fault. I was following up another lead while she was being targeted."

"But by who?"

"I have no idea. If she'd discovered a new fact about the Master Builders I might have been worried THEY had got a hold of her. But this is about Atlantis. No, whoever got her knows she'd discovered Atlantis."

"Seeing as Atlantis is more renowned for its enormous wealth, we can hope that whoever we're dealing with are willing to negotiate on financial terms."

"You mean ransom?"

"Sure. Your father's rich enough to pay anyone off. You will buy her life, won't you?"

"Hold on Tom. I know you're smitten with her, but let's not jump the gun here. No one has even asked for a ransom yet. We might just solve this problem ourselves. Alternatively, I'm sure you can agree that Billie can be... how do I say this? A little rough around the edges. We might just get lucky and have them decide she's not worth it and send her back?"

Tom looked at Sam. The man was making a joke, but even so, it was the wrong one. He fought himself not to take the bait.

"Okay, what about your lead. What did you find?"

"Nothing. A dead end."

"So what exactly do we know happened to Billie?"

"She was on her way back from the National Archives Center when she called me to tell me that some people had been following her. I told her to stay on the main roads and that I would come and get her."

"So what happened? Why didn't you protect her?"

"By the time I reached her, they had already got to her. It appears that someone intentionally drove into her to send her off the bridge and into the bay below. By the time I entered the car, one of

the windows on the driver's side had been broken – from the outside in – and the rear back door was still wide open.”

“Okay, so someone took her while the car was sinking. That’s promising. At least they didn’t intend for her to drown. Did you retrieve anything from her car?”

Sam looked guilty.

“When I dived down the trunk was open and there was nothing inside.”

“Oh shit! Don’t tell me...”

“She should have had her laptop with her today.”

Tom shook his head. “Do you have a backup hard drive?”

“Sure, but now they know what we do. Which means we’re in trouble.”

Tom grinned. “That’s great news...”

“What the hell makes you say that?”

“Because if Billie’s as smart as we both know she is, she’ll work out the next stage of the map and leave a clue for us.”

“That’s great, but you’re forgetting one thing.”

“What?”

“We have to work out the next step of the map.”

“But we know that she was on to something at the National Archives. She found it, didn’t she?”

“Yes, the Arcane Stone.”

“That sounds like something out of Harry Potter. What is it?”

“Legend is, the Arcane Stone, when placed correctly, will guide the viewer to the opening of the Atlantis Archives – a secret library built during the reign of the Atlantean people, in order to document their history.”

“So, she has it?”

“No she made digital copies. Said the security was too tight to steal it, or she would have.”

“Do we know where to use it?”

“No, but Billie definitely did. And I’m hopeful we can work it out.”

Chapter Eight

Andrew entered the National Archives building.

After watching the two men walk up the stairs, he followed them, walking up the first two sets of stairs and heading directly toward the last three rows of archives, in a section dated 1630 to 1650. There, the two men had stopped to examine the dates. One appeared average in height, while the other looked like a giant. Both men, he noticed, had arms and shoulders as big as professional boxers. There was also something about their posture that suggested they were both confident and focused at the same time.

The taller of the two had dark curly hair and hazel eyes. His face portrayed a certain intensity that Andrew couldn't quite put his finger on immediately. He carefully examined the man's features until it registered, as he knew it would – this man has a relationship with Dr. Swan which is strictly non-professional. Whereas the shorter one, who was still at least six feet tall, had dark blue eyes, tousled brown hair that looked like he'd just come out of the surf, and a grin that made him appear more interested in the antiquity he was admiring than whether or not he was able to rescue Dr. Swan.

He guessed they had both served in the military at some stage, and would be quick and capable at defending themselves if the need were to arise. Not that Andrew envisaged any reason for that today. After all, he wanted them to succeed as much as they did. It was only through them he could discover where Dr. Billie Swan had been taken.

To reach Atlantis, he was going to need her help, and he would have it – whether she wanted to give it, or not.

He had no reason to hide. He'd never met or even seen either man before. He'd heard about Sam Reilly, and had previously been approached by his rich father with business, but there was no way the two men could place him with any connection to Billie's abduction.

Especially, since, in the end, someone else got to her first.

The two men in front of him opened several books, appearing to check serial numbers and dates. After making notes, he heard the shorter of the two men say, "Okay, let's go get it."

Andrew opened up a book called *Reclaiming Land from the Sea* and pretended to read it as he watched the two men enter another room labeled Historical Artifacts.

The shorter of the two handed the librarian a piece of paper, presumably with the item's serial number. Both men were asked to provide photo identification and then directed to sit down.

Andrew put his book back and walked closer toward where Sam and Tom were now patiently sitting, waiting for the librarian to bring out whatever it was they were after. The second she returned and placed it on the table in front of them, the lights above made it shine like an orange sun. He was stunned at its appearance. He recognized the artifact immediately.

The Arcane Stone

Confused, he recalled that the Arcane Stone had been lost for centuries.

He watched the two men quickly examine the stone. Then, after a quick exchange of words that he couldn't quite make out, the taller of the two placed the artifact in his pocket and stood up.

Andrew looked to the entrance at the other end of the building. There were at least ten security guards.

All armed.

Surely they wouldn't be so stupid as to try to steal the damn thing?

His eyes returned to the room they had been sitting in. They were both gone. Andrew quickly ran to the main entrance of the artifact room.

There he was met by the same lady who'd retrieved the artifact for the two men.

"Where did they go?" he asked, urgently.

"Where did who go?"

"Sam Reilly and Tom Bower. They were examining the Arcane Stone."

"I've never heard of those gentlemen." She smiled helpfully and said, "But there is a Mr. Duchamp and his associate, from the British Museum, who are examining the artifact."

She turned her head to point them out, but they were no longer able to be seen.

"I'm sorry. They appear to have left."

Andrew turned around, scanning the area, and then said, "And they took the Arcane Stone with them. Call security. Place the archives into emergency lockdown."

"Who are you to give me orders?"

Andrew showed the lady his ID card. She stepped back in visible fear.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Brandt."

Chapter Nine

Sam Reilly followed Tom, who walked confidently out the front door of the artifact storage room. Neither of them ran but to a casual observer appeared focused and moving toward a purpose. No one would have expected them to have committed a great theft.

He took note of the man in the dark suit with a blue tie. Sam thought he looked out of place reading the history of the development of Amsterdam's waterways. Even at a glance, Sam thought the man appeared to be more suited to a boardroom as an executive than an archeologist. Then he saw the distinct bulge on the side of his coat.

The man was packing a weapon of some sort.

Judging by the shape it made, Sam was pretty confident it had a silencer attached to its barrel. And that meant he wasn't part of the good guys' team. He certainly didn't look like any of the security personnel he'd taken note of when they entered the building.

Sam looked at Tom's face. One glance, and Sam knew they shared the same evaluation of the man. The two quickly moved behind the next row of shelves. Without saying a word, they began following the miles of bookshelves deeper into the heart of the National Archives Center.

And then the alarm sounded.

"Well Tom, that was unexpected," Sam said calmly. "Do you think you might let me know next time before you steal an ancient relic?"

Tom looked guilty. "Sorry, I figured we don't have time to play by the rules. It was meant to have been made of copper or something. Can't be too valuable. I didn't expect them to have someone guarding it."

"Well, it's done now." Sam picked up his phone and rang a secure number.

"Who're you trying to call at a time like this?"

"Elise. And I'm trying to get us out of here."

Elise was a computer whiz Sam had met years ago during his specialized training as a Ghost Agent for the U.S. Military. He never saw her in person, only through computer challenges and games of riddles designed to test how each of them responded had they become friends. From what he'd heard, Elise had an IQ of 162 – that was two points higher than Einstein, and she'd been recruited by the CIA when she was still a teenager.

Elise had discovered something that she didn't agree with while working for the agency and a few years later, simply disappeared. Sam worried that her malcontent had gotten her killed, but last year she started sending him encrypted messages that only he and four other people on the planet could possibly decipher. Since then, Elise had been working intermittently on a variety of projects for Sam.

Sam took the lead and started running down a set of stairs, which led deeper into the archives storage, where millions of boxes covered more than ten miles of basement.

"Where the hell are you headed? We're only burying ourselves deeper by going that way."

Sam ignored the question and kept running.

"Sam, what do you need?" It was Elise, his computer whiz, who answered. Her voice was curt, as though she'd been expecting his call.

In front of them, a solid glass door was locked. Tom kicked at it several times without making so much as a scratch.

"You know how we discussed plan A and plan B for getting the Arcane Stone?" Sam said.

"Yeah."

"Well, Tom decided he'd elect for plan B. Now we've got about twenty security guards, and some sort of spook I've never seen before, after us. We've just reached the basement, and the first door is locked."

"Ah, boys. You sure will get yourselves into trouble."

Above, someone started shooting at them. He guessed it must have been the man with the silencer, because he couldn't hear the sound of the shots being fired. Only the sight of bullet holes ahead let him know. They were off by several feet. More warning shots, he guessed.

"Not to rush you Elise, but we're a little short of time. Can you open the basement door or not?"

"Hang on. I'm just getting you on their CCT. Ah, there you are. Tell Tom he looks guilty as hell."

"Yeah, well, that's because he is. Not that it's gonna matter much if you don't get us out of..."

And then the glass doors clicked open.

They both ran towards the end of the corridor, where the next door opened automatically for them, and then the next one.

"I'm just going to superimpose fictional characters over your

bodies, so that the investigators don't get an accurate image of you two. You're now Santa Claus, and I'm afraid Tom's one of the reindeer... you know that one with the bright red nose, or something..."

"Rudolf?"

"That's the one."

Sam stopped. Dead in his tracks. The last door remained firmly locked.

"Elise, I'm going to need the last door opened."

"Are you sure? That's a pressurized room – they're not going to be very happy if you destroy their sterile atmosphere."

"And I feel terrible about it, really I do... but if you don't open it, I'll be asking you to break us out of prison, or more likely, find us a nice place to be buried!"

The door opened.

And the two men walked into the sterile room.

Sam looked around, pulling covers off drawers, searching for something.

"Stop where you are! You have no way out, and we're armed." It was the stern voices of the security guards.

The security door closed once more.

A couple of the guards kicked at it aimlessly before accepting that it was locked and had been designed to offer protection against force.

Sam looked behind and saw that the man in the dark suit with the blue tie was ordering them about. He stared at the man for a second. There was something sinister about his grey and intense eyes.

Who are you?

Confident that the door was sealed for the time being, while Elise had control of their computer system at least, Sam turned to ignore them and kept pulling expensive drawers out of the desks around the sterile room.

"What are you looking for Sam?" Tom asked.

"A way out, anywhere."

"Um... those are just drawers. What are you expecting to find?"

"This," Sam said revealing an opening.

Sam turned to look at the man who had been following him since he arrived at the National Archives Center.

And then stepped into the garbage chute.

Chapter Ten

It was a short fast ride to the bottom, where Sam landed on a pile of garbage. He cringed when he considered what type of previously sterile equipment could have been thrown out.

“You okay, Tom?” he said, while climbing out the bin, just in time to avoid having Tom land on him.

“Never better – you?”

“I’m fine.”

He admired his new environment. Most of Amsterdam was built on dikes, or piers above the waterways and canals. The National Archives Center was above such water, but below it there was a world built for boats – shallow boats – that could move waste from underneath hundreds of buildings just like this one. If Sam reached up, he could almost touch the ceiling, which formed part of the road above them. In the distance, light flickered in through several openings to the outside world.

Next to him, as promised, a wooden sports boat was tied up to the jetty.

“Look Tom, some nice person left the keys for us.”

Tom grinned. “I knew you weren’t going to get us killed – today.”

Starting the motor, Sam grinned as he threw off the rope lines and began heading out. A heads up display came on in front of him, revealing a preprogrammed map of the waterway below the city of Amsterdam. Like a GPS, but based on navigation markers instead of satellites. He began to follow it.

“That was close,” Sam said, shaking his head. “I thought you’d give me a bit more of a heads up before doing something reckless with our lives.”

“Sure was. Hey, what was plan A, anyway?”

“Plan A?” Sam laughed. “I call my dad, he asks a favor from a friend who’s President of the board, and we get to borrow the Arcane Stone.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? We nearly got killed, and you could have just mentioned that your dad’s friend is on the board?”

“Yeah, well, to be honest, it could have taken a few days to arrange. I’m with you. Every minute counts. Besides, we’ll return their artifact when we’ve got Billie back in one piece.”

“You might want to throw in a couple million in rebuild costs,”
Tom said.

“I wouldn’t say we did that much damage.”

“Yeah, but he might.”

Sam looked up at the bridge ahead.

Where a man dropped a grenade down on them.

Chapter Eleven

Sam swerved the boat to the left.

As it turned in a sharp arc, both men were pushed hard into the boat's leather seats as centrifugal force hammered them with pressure. The massive V8 engine screamed, and the back of the boat dug deep into the water. A bow wave seven feet high lapped toward the grenade, and then the boat took off again.

Shooting off in the new direction, their bow had only just broken the surface tension, allowing them to skim along the water – and then the grenade detonated.

The blast sent jets of water in all directions.

But their boat rode high, with its bow skimming above. Sam turned his head back as much as he dared while keeping the boat on its careful balancing track.

“Are we clear?” Sam shouted.

“Yeah I think we just made it.”

And then just ahead, five jet skis approached.

“Any chance they're just out for a joyride?” Sam asked.

A dozen bullets raked the front of their boat.

“I guess that's a no.”

Sam swerved to the right.

“Tom, have a look in the back there. See if Elise left us something more useful.”

“I'm onto it.”

A moment later Tom lifted up an RPG 7 – the Russian version of the Rocket Propelled Grenade Launcher, with an explosive head designed for antitank warfare.

“How about this?”

“Sure...” Sam said, taking a turn to the left again, down a narrow waterway. “I was thinking something more along the lines of a machine gun, but that'll have to do. But there's five jet skis. What are you going to do, blow up each of them?”

“I think I've got an idea. See that bridge over there on the right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think you can make it there?”

“I’ll give it a try.” Sam turned to the right again.

More bullets sprayed the water just behind them. “You’d better make it quick!”

Turning into the next waterway, Sam replied, “What the hell do you think I’m doing?” He took one more quick turn and then was travelling underneath the bridge. “Okay, I’m here – now what?”

The jet skis came on.

Tom ducked.

Their pursuers’ machine guns fired in a blaze of red tracer bullets.

“Just a little further...”

Tom fired the RPG.

It struck the base of the largest pier. For a second the only sound that could be heard were the machine gun bullets, getting closer to them.

And then the tip of the explosive head ruptured.

One after the next, the shock waves sent vibrations through the water. Behind them, he heard the crack of thunder. It was the sound of the pier collapsing, sending an entire road bridge plummeting into the water.

The jet skis were forced to turn back, while the subsequent wave of destruction plowed eagerly toward them, with deadly force.

“You might want to pick it up a notch Sam. That thing looks like it’s going to swamp us.”

“I’m trying,” Sam said impatiently. “What do you suggest I do?”

Tom grinned. “Press the red button?”

“What bloody red button!”

At the center of the little wooden sports craft’s dashboard stood a single red button. It had the same kind of refinement as a British high end motor car, while appearing equally out of place on the little wooden boat.

Tom held on and pressed the button.

The engine sputtered for a second and then sounded like it was choking, before the turbo charger filled with jet fuel and kicked into life. The boat literally leaped out of the water, its propeller barely touching the surface of the water, while Sam fought desperately to keep it from flipping.

The turbo burst lasted just forty-five seconds, and then the boat

settled back into the water. Behind them, the wave had disappeared along with the jet skis.

Sam returned to the preprogramed route on the heads up display. Elise had left him the boat with a destination.

Tom looked up ahead. "Any idea where we're heading?"

"Yeah, Nepal."

Tom latched onto the boat's handle, as Sam swerved to the left. "Why the hell are we going to Nepal?"

"Because I just realized what Billie was after." He stopped the boat before Tom could ask more. "Here's our stop."

Sam engaged the boat's autopilot and sent it off into the canal again. A single workman's door was located at the base of the concrete pier. There they climbed the stairs and entered the main foyer of the Waldorf Astoria Amsterdam.

A waiter in a tuxedo looked at the two disheveled men with a bemused smile. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, we have a reservation." Sam smiled. "Can you please send your best scotch to the penthouse?"

Chapter Twelve

Andrew Brandt stepped down to the water's edge, staring at the ducks in the distance. Like a child, he picked up a rock and threw it at them. They scattered in an instant, and three jet skis approached in their wake.

It was a burst of temper that he rarely allowed himself to show. And he immediately reined in on it. Forcing himself to smile, he said, "There were five of you, and still you lost them?"

"We found his boat, but it appears he and his friend must have got off somewhere before and then left the boat going on its autopilot."

"One of you is going to fix this. Or I suggest you don't bother coming back to see me."

Each of the three men looked at each other and then back to him again. One look at his serious face, and they clambered back onto their jet skis and disappeared. Although none of them had seen Andrew kill a person himself, no one doubted what he was capable of.

Andrew's cell rang once.

"Jason. Tell me some good fucking news."

Andrew listened to the man's response. A genuine grin crossing his face. "Really? You've got to be kidding me." Andrew laughed for the first time that day. "Buy it. I don't care how much it costs. I want that stone. And, Jason... don't fail me with this."

Chapter Thirteen

In the grandmaster's sitting room of the Waldorf, Sam carefully studied the inscriptions on the Arcane Stone, and then swore.

"It's a fake! We nearly got ourselves killed for a fucking replica!" Sam wanted to punch something, or someone, very hard.

"Are you certain?" Tom asked.

Sam brought up the screen-shot from Billie's notes. These were the notes Billie had of the real Arcane Stone. It was made from orichalcum, an alloy only ever found in the hills surrounding Atlantis. A naturally forming alloy, consisting of gold, copper, zinc, and lead.

"The dimensions are identical to the original, but the metal is entirely copper."

"So, won't it still work to identify the opening to the Atlantis Archives?"

"No. Billie's notes tell us that orichalcum has a very unique and rare response to light, in which it magnifies light three or four times better than copper. Even if this is shaped identically to the real Arcane Stone, it would never reflect the light in the same manner."

Tom shrugged his shoulder, as if to say, 'it all sounds close enough to me.'

"Come on, Tom, we have a flight to catch."

"But you said this thing's a fake and won't help us?"

"It won't. But I know someone who will."

The two quickly walked to the front of the hotel and caught a cab from out the front.

"Elise. I'm texting you an image of a device found by a Hank Worthington in 1638."

"And how are you, too? I'm glad you appreciate me saving your lives. Although why I bother I don't know. After all, between the two of you, I'm certain you're both more interested in throwing them away."

"I'm sorry Elise. We're in some trouble – again. I need you to locate something for me."

"Sure. What is it?"

"It's called the Arcane Stone and at the time was believed to be made of brass, but archeologists have long thought that it might have been made of orichalcum. According to Billie's notes, it's a key to an

ancient archive for the people of Atlantis.”

“That’s if they existed, at all?”

“They existed Elise. Find me that artifact, and I’ll prove it to you.”

“Very good. Give me a few minutes and I’ll let you know what I’ve found. Where are you headed?”

“Nepal.”

“Really? You believe all that crap that the Nazis propaganda machine put out about the lost civilization of Atlantis being in the Himalayas?”

“No. But I believe their archives have been recorded there for the past 11,000 years.”

“And the Arcane Stone is going to show you the way?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Hang on a second Sam. I think I’ve got something, but you’re not going to like it.”

“Why not?”

“The Arcane Stone is currently owned by the Le Milieu Corso-Marseillais. They’re a secret society that has close links with just about every form of organized crime, from drugs, human trafficking –right through to the provisioning of private mercenary armies.”

Sam sighed. “That’s fine. Are they willing to sell it?”

“Sure are. Terrorism doesn’t come cheap these days. They currently have it listed on the Dark Net for 10 million Euros, with a note that it holds the key to locating Atlantis and other unknown riches. It’s probably a fake anyway.”

Tom interrupted. “Hey, Elise. Sorry to interrupt. What the hell’s the Dark Net?”

“Hi Tom. You know how most things we do on the internet is clearly visible to everyone. We make things available to search engines like Google. The dark net is the rest of the internet, where general users have no means of accessing information without knowing the precise URL to begin with. It’s used for secrecy, and as well as the latest conspiracy theorist, organized crime seem to like it for its obvious benefits.”

The cab pulled into the Schiphol Amsterdam Airport.

“Enough of the computer science lesson, Elise. Billie’s in trouble. Tell them the price is fine. Buy it for me and send it where I’m headed in Nepal. I’ll send you the address in a second.”

“But you’re not going to Nepal.”

“I’m not?”

“No, Le Milieu Corso-Marseillais don’t sell through Ebay or anything like that. You’re going to need to actually meet them. They won’t have a thing to do with you or your absurd amounts of money without seeing you in person.”

“All right, all right. Where are we headed?”

“The French Riviera.”

“That sounds all right. By the way you were speaking, I thought you were going to send me off to Iran or something difficult.”

“No, but don’t let the lovely location or the romantic lights fool you. These people maintain one of the cruelest and most ruthless organizations in the world. Just because you’re a potential buyer doesn’t make you their friend or in any less danger. You’re going to want to be careful.”

“Okay, arrange a meeting for me Elise.”

“Will do, and be careful.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll bring Tom along for a show of muscle.”

Chapter Fourteen

Billie woke up to the throbbing pain in her head.

Whatever sedative she'd been given, it had left a terrible aftereffect of amnesia, disorientation and pain. She could do nothing about the pain, but she would immediately work to rectify the other two problems.

How the fuck did I get here? Billie thought about it for a minute. She'd been driving in Amsterdam. Something had frightened her. *But what?* She felt the itch above her forehead and went to scratch. It was swollen and there were several surgical stitches under her hair line. *That's new.*

Instantly, Billie returned to the events of earlier today, or yesterday – or however much time had passed and she'd been unconscious since the accident. Someone had learned what she knew and had come for her. She'd contacted Sam Reilly, and he'd said he would come for her, but something happened and he never reached her.

They had knocked her car into the water! She had tried to escape the sinking car, only to find that a diver had given her something, and taken her...

Billie looked around, trying to orient herself.

The room was mostly dark, with the dull ambient fluorescent lights outside barely providing enough light to see. There was no door, and she wondered if she could leave if she tried to. Her hand touched the metal wall next to the bed she'd woken up in. It vibrated, just slightly. And an image of a turbine spinning matched the constant drum she'd heard since waking.

They have me on a ship?

The realization hit her with surprise. She stood up and looked at the floor below her. It was metal. More like a steel grate on a working ship. Although she'd only just clambered out of the bed, her feet felt stable.

No, there's no swell or movement of the waves. Even in a flat sea, she knew there was a certain amount of movement.

She looked around the room.

It looked like a bedroom, with a slightly smaller than normal single bed. There were no windows, or anything else to be seen inside the room. The walls were dark.

I'm in a submarine?

With an air of fatalism, she stepped out of the room and down the dark passageway. Looking for anything that wasn't bolted to the walls that could be used as a weapon, Billie found that she was completely vulnerable.

Up ahead she thought she could hear something other than the sound of turbines. It creaked and cracked, as an open fire would. Slowly she progressed, walking ten or so feet and then stopping to listen. Her ears sensitive to the slightest change in sound, and expecting to hear someone come out to grab her at any moment, Billie clenched her fists.

But no one came for her.

She continued walking through the passageway. It was long. Much longer than any submarine she'd ever been on, not that she'd been on many. Still she expected that whatever type of submersible she was aboard, required hundreds of people to sail – but despite walking for several minutes now, she'd seen no evidence of anyone.

I'm on a deserted ghost ship?

Billie wasn't immediately certain that she preferred that any more than discovering it was swarming with submariners. At least then, she'd have answers. Besides, if they didn't let her die in the first place, that meant they needed her alive.

Determined to take control of the only thing left to her, she decided not to continue slinking around quietly like a cat in an alley.

She whistled loudly.

The sound echoed through the empty hull.

"I'm awake! You may as well come out. I know you don't want to kill me, or else you wouldn't have dressed my wounds. So come out!"

There was no response.

A thousand tiny prickles teased the nerve endings of her skin. Perhaps she really was on a ghost ship. But why? Why go through the trouble of abducting her – healing her – only to abandon her below the surface of the ocean?

No, someone will come.

But they didn't, so she continued walking through the passageway. Although narrow, it had nearly six feet of head room above. That meant she was most likely on an American sub – after all, no other navy in the world believed in such luxuries for its sailors.

At the end of the room, she saw an old man who most likely was nearing his early eighties. He was sitting and reading a book in a

recliner chair. Next to him was a large heat light, built to look like a fire.

It crackled, like a real fire.

The man smiled warmly, but did not stand up as she approached.

“Hello Dr. Swan. I was hoping you’d wake up soon. We have a lot of work to do and it’s time we get started.”

Billie looked at the old man. “Started? What are we doing?”

He carefully placed a bookmark in the old leather-bound book he’d been reading and then closed it. With an omniscient grin, he replied, “Why, saving Atlantis, of course.”

Chapter Fifteen

“So, that’s what this is about.” Billie looked at the old man, her fear replaced with curiosity, as confidence dawned on her that she could probably kill him with her bare hands. “You heard that I had a new lead and decided that you could reap the rewards?”

“Reap the rewards?” he asked, a curious look on his face.

“The golden city. Or, city covered in the gold rich alloy, Orichalcum.”

Laughing, the man sat up and said, “So you don’t know then, do you?”

“Know what?”

“Atlantis, my dear, for the most part, was stolen nearly 150 years ago.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I should know. After all, it was my grandfather who did the stealing.”

“So, if you didn’t kidnap me to find the treasures hidden inside Atlantis, why am I here?”

“First of all, I never kidnapped you. I protected you from them. And I would have thought you’d be more grateful for it, on that matter.”

“Then can I leave...” she began to protest, but he stopped her.

“Second. We need to find Atlantis, before they do, and stop the countdown, which we both know you started.”

Billie already knew the precise location of Atlantis. She’d been there only just last week. But instead of finding answers, she had found more questions and discovered that she had inadvertently restarted a timer that should have been permanently stopped.

But there was no way she was going to let this man know.

“Who are they?”

“They...” the man coughed. A deep throaty cough. “They call themselves the Phoenix Resistance. And have served a useful purpose for nearly 11,000 years, too. They protected the secret of Atlantis. But, like all brotherhoods, they are run by people. And people, well – let’s face it, people are corruptible, ignorant, and most of all, stupid.”

Billie examined the man’s appearance and decided that he could be dying. Maybe lung cancer or something. Hell what did she care?

The man had kidnapped her.

“What happened to them?”

“Over the course of that time, the Phoenix Resistance, in the process of trying to maintain the secret of Atlantis, managed to lose it altogether on three separate occasions. The most recent, of course, being nearly 200 years ago, when their plan to bury it ended in its disappearance entirely.”

She repeated the words “Phoenix Resistance.” She’d never heard of them.

“For the most part, they carry on, biding their time, until evidence of its reemergence comes into light. As it did with your recent discovery of the looking glass and the existence of Atlantis.”

“How could you possibly know of that?”

“Let’s just say that money’s not a problem for me. And, I keep tabs on a number of leading archeologists around the world, just on the off chance that such an event occurs, sending into motion a dangerous set of events.”

“What events?”

“Why, the end of the world of course.”

Billie couldn’t hide her response. “So, it’s true then.”

“Yes, and given that you entered all but the inner sanctum last week – that means that we now have a little under five weeks remaining to save the world.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name’s Edward Worthington, and my grandfather, Hank Worthington, stole the great wealth of Atlantis, before he too discovered its secret. He decided to bury its very existence, so that no others should fall into the trap.”

Billie sat down.

“Okay, Mr. Worthington, if what you say is true, why didn’t you simply contact me? Why did you go through the effort of nearly getting me killed?”

“Ah, that I’m afraid I brought upon you, but had no idea I was doing so until it was too late.”

“What do you mean? You didn’t realize you ordered one of your goons to try and kill me?”

“No, you see, I paid a man who specialized in rare and often unattainable products. I sought his assistance when I discovered that you were on the close tail of finding Atlantis. Unfortunately, I had no

idea that the very man I employed just so happened to be a sleeper cell for the head of the Phoenix Resistance. I fear something you did while you were in Amsterdam triggered something that made him realize who you were, and why I was after you.”

“Who was after me?”

Mr. Worthington brought up a picture on a hologram in front of them. The man was in a blue suit, clean shaven, and carrying a suitcase. He appeared quite handsome, had he not been trying to kill her or at least abduct her only yesterday.

“His name is Andrew Brandt. This was him three days ago when I paid him 5 million dollars as a down payment to bring you to me.”

Her eyes looked at the man for a second and then realized she’s seen him before. “The man with blond hair in a red baseball cap!”

“Excuse me?”

“He was at the National Archives center in Amsterdam!”

“That’s possible.”

“But now we need to find Atlantis, before they do. And the clock is ticking.”

“If I contact the other two members of my team, we will have a better chance of finding it.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because, the Phoenix Resistance are after you. If they find you, and therefore beat us to Atlantis, all is lost.”

“Why? What is so important about Atlantis?”

“I think you know, as well as I do.”

Billie did know, but she certainly wasn’t going to let him hold all the cards. She nodded her head in acceptance.

Edward then said, “No, its best that you and I go searching for Atlantis, while Sam and Tom lead them away. If they think you’re dead, they will go after the next best lead they have, and that means Sam and Tom.”

A man approached. He had a solid build, pale skin, and brown hair cut in a short military style. “Dr. Swan, this is Mark.”

The man shook her hand. “Pleased to meet you again Dr. Swan. I’m afraid the last time we might have gotten off on the wrong foot, although it was in your best interests. May I please welcome you to this submarine and apologize for how you came to be aboard.”

She took his hand and replied, “Nice to meet you Mark. I don’t blame you for nearly getting me killed. For that, we have Edward.”

Billy looked at the man’s eyes. They were an intense blue, and a pleasant enough smile. But, although she didn’t say so, there was something about him that gave her the creeps.

Edward looked at her. As though he’d read her mind, Edward said, “Mark has worked for me for the past twenty years and is exceedingly loyal – to those who pay him well. He will be your bodyguard.”

Chapter Sixteen

Billie stood warming her hands by the fire. “All right. If your grandfather buried it, why don’t you know where it is?”

Edward ignored her question, as he had so many others. “Let me tell you what I know from my sources so that you can clear up any of my confusions – and I have so many these days.”

He didn’t wait for her to acknowledge her acquiescence, and instead continued. “You found a series of pictographs on a sarcophagus inside an ancient pyramid. All of which represented a known place of historical significance. The only one that had not been officially discovered, was Atlantis. Then you found a looking glass, which somehow allowed you to see the image of each of the archeological sites.”

She nodded her head, not wanting to give away more than she had to.

“I’ve read your notes, and see that you could calculate the exact distance between the location of the pyramid and each of the sites by measuring the distance between the center of the map and each of the pictographs. And you were able to work out that of the 13 sites displayed on the seeing tube, or looking glass as you called it, six were above the equator, while six were below it and the thirteenth, or looking-glass was directly along the equator.”

He paused long enough for her to add anything if she felt like, which she didn’t.

He then continued. “What I don’t understand is how you derived a need to visit Amsterdam?”

“We calculated three separate known cities which roughly matched the distance that we calculated from the main site. These were, Amsterdam, Nice and New York.”

“And you chose Amsterdam first, because...”

“The pictograph that represented what we believe to be Atlantis, depicted a circular city, with dozens of canals, protected via dikes. When I looked at the three cities, and the image of Atlantis, I thought, ‘Which one most closely resembles the original city?’ Thus, I came up with Amsterdam, which luckily happened to be the big break.”

“That’s very good, Dr. Swan. A fanciful story at best. I think if I were to sit down here with a map and calculate the exact distance from the Gulf of Mexico and those three cities, I would most likely find three very different answers.”

Billie felt a warm flush of blood flow to her cheeks. He'd caught her in a lie. Even if she had no reason to be honest with him, it made her feel guilty.

She didn't even try to deny it, and Edward continued. "In Atlantis you realized that you needed a code – Let's call it the code to Atlantis. Without it, you have no ability to access any further information from its inner sanctum, and nor do you have any control over the timer that you've begun."

Billie kept her thoughts to herself on the matter, but inwardly, she was writhing with curiosity.

"It was here that you realized that the ancient Atlantean people had built a second temple – not too dissimilar to their original one. The purpose of which, was not to house the great wealth and even greater power that Atlantis was built on. Instead, it was a great vault. An ancient set of archives, which tells of the history of earth."

"Yes. I went to Amsterdam in search of a key to the archives to Atlantis."

"Did you find it?" He seemed only mildly interested.

"Yes. But it was my interest in it that seemed to bring me to the attention of yourself, and if I should believe you, the Phoenix Resistance."

"My dear Dr. Swan. The simple matter of whether you believe me or not has no bearing on the fact that there *is* an ancient brotherhood who want that code to Atlantis as much as we do. And if they beat us to it, the result can only mean the ending of the world as we know it."

She was a scientist. As such, Billie had spent her life assessing everything with circumspection and objectivity. But as she listened to this old stranger, she knew in her heart he was speaking the truth.

Seemingly confident he'd made his point, Edward said, "In Amsterdam you learned Felix Brandt was one of the last people to ever see Atlantis, and that, after returning to Amsterdam, he travelled to Tibet. There he lived out the remainder of his days, presumably documenting the history of the world high in the Atlantean archives."

"That's right. So, every archeologist and treasure hunter in the last two centuries have heard the rumor that an ancient Atlantean left a treasure trove of orichalcum somewhere in the mountains of Tibet, along with the key to the city's central vault and a map that could outlast the ages of time."

"Yes, something like that. Of course no one's ever been able to locate it have they? Yet, you located something in Amsterdam. What

was it, a map?”

“Not quite a map. I discovered a key to an ancient map.”

Edward laughed, as though he’d had enough fun with her. “Dr. Swan. On that account we’re in luck. As it so happens, I once owned the Arcane Stone. It has since been stolen from me. But I have previously used it to mark the secret location of the Atlantean Archives.”

She grinned mischievously. *What does this man actually need from me?* “And what did you find there?”

“A whole lot of ancient texts. The same as those that riddle the walls of Atlantis. I’m not a linguist, Dr. Swan. I have studied far and wide, and in my short 80 years of life on this earth, I have learned to make sense out of some of the images. But for the most part, I need your help.”

“How do you know that I’ll have any more luck understanding it than you?”

“Because as you know, it’s the same language that you’ve studied for years. The one you believe came from the Master Builders, although I believe we’re both going to find that the simplest explanation for them was that they were simply Gods.”

Billie tried to hide her surprise. And then said, “Gods? The last time people truly believed that the Gods lived among us was in ancient Greece, and even then, no one really believed the stories.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

Billie was certain. She might overlook her scientific objectivity in place of a gut instinct about an old man, but resting the answers to some of the biggest questions to plague her life on ancient Gods, was one giant step too much for her to take.

He smiled at her and said, “Don’t worry Dr. Swan. I’m not planning on preaching. It was just a thought.”

Yet something about his smile made her wonder what he really knew about the Master Builders.

“What now, then?”

“And so, Billie, you and I are on our way to Tibet, to climb a mountain.”

Chapter Seventeen

Andrew Brandt looked at the robe in his wardrobe. His father had been the last to wear it, and the last to truly believe in the Phoenix Resistance. It had been nearly twenty years since the ancient brotherhood met for official reasons, but in that time, the internet and global communications had changed a lot. As did the way they ran their business in the past eleven thousand years.

What was once a society hidden by cloaks of darkness, and secret handshakes was now run by five men from around the world, each powerful and intelligent in their own right. A merchant banker, a Russian oil and gas tycoon, a leader of the most dangerous private mercenary army in the world, a politician, a CEO of one of the greatest technology firms on the planet.

Their faces had been obscured to maintain anonymity. Andrew had never met any of them in person. But together they had a combined power that enabled them to change the world.

Of the five of them, Andrew had been chosen to now lead the secret organization.

One of them was still missing, lost in action. He had gone to infiltrate an enemy of the brotherhood. But now, it appeared that the man had been killed as a result, and hadn't been heard of since.

Instead of secret caves, handshakes, and all those stupid things that went with the role, the small gathering met via video conferencing, over secure networks, using satellites that Andrew, himself, owned.

Up until a couple days ago, Andrew had assumed the entire premise for their organization had been a giant farce, made up by one of his great ancestors to maintain power and control over his fellow man. The only reason he'd even maintained the pretense and continued the organization, managing it as the most senior leader, was because of the connections that the organization had given him.

After all, each of the men in the virtual room today had a net worth of nearly a hundred million dollars. And that sort of money came with contacts.

Still in his day suit, having long ago abandoned the ornamental cloaks, he accepted the final member to the virtual room and began to chair the meeting.

"Nearly six hours ago a woman I was paid to capture was stolen from me. It has since then come to my attention that she was in possession of the knowledge that lead her towards the current resting

place of Atlantis.”

He saw the same look on their faces as he had his own. They all said the same thing: *so Atlantis was real, and so was the prophecy...*

“Do we know how much they know?” It was Kazimir – his name literally meant the destroyer of peace.

“No, we know that they discovered something that proved unequivocally the existence of Atlantis and directed them to Amsterdam. What sent them there, I have no idea. There, they found the map to the gateway, also known as the Arcane Stone. Without Dr. Billie Swan, Sam Reilly and Tom Bower are having to backtrack, but they’re gaining momentum and have already booked a flight to Tibet!”

“Tibet?” It was Richard who spoke first. “But we’ve already been to Tibet. There’s nothing but scribbles there. Codes to enter the inner sanctum of Atlantis. But they’re worth nothing without any knowledge of Atlantis itself.”

“But what if they already know?” said Mr. Armel, the head of a private army of expert soldiers. He had employed soldiers who were leaders in their own country, turning them to the lucrative profession of mercenaries.

Andrew smiled. “No, I don’t think Sam Reilly and Tom Bower know any more than we do. But what about Dr. Swan?”

James Bradley, a billionaire turned politician from Oregon, looked irritated. “And if Dr. Swan does know its exact location, then that would explain why someone would want to abduct her. Which brings us to the next logical question. Who would have the knowledge and power to do so?”

Andrew sighed. He’d not thought it through so far. “No idea, but I’ve already sent a team there personally, to protect the code to the gateway and find out.”

Chapter Eighteen

French Riviera – Four Weeks Remaining

Le Vieux, Nice was a honeycomb of narrow streets, dotted with beautiful Baroque churches, vibrant squares, and restaurants. Its dark narrow lanes were crammed with delis, boutique eateries, and bars full of beautiful people. The old town was overflowing with them. Like their Parisian counterparts, the people of Nice were splendidly dressed in the latest style, with slim figures and attractive features befitting the latest fashion magazines. The average men looked like they had walked off the set to a Calvin Klein modeling campaign, including white shorts, blue sailor tops, and brown wavy hair, tussled by the salty sea breeze. Their women took style and glamor up several notches.

At the end of the tiny street, the pristine waters of the French Riviera could be seen, littered with expensive yachts. Here the elite, famous and richest people of the world competed to see who'd acquired the best beach toy.

Sam casually scanned the bay, his interest barely piqued by the abundance of beautiful yachts. Instead, he stared at one vessel that stood out amongst the others. Not because it was the most beautiful, but because in a world of yachts filled with hulls built of carbon fiber, delicate woodwork, and gold emblazing, the large steel hull of what appeared to be an old icebreaker looked as though it didn't belong. Anchored slightly further out, as though it was being ostracized.

It was painted sky blue. And along the ship's angular steel hull, in large emerald writing, were the words MARIA HELENA. Below, in smaller writing – Deep Sea Expeditions. From the distance, it looked like nothing more than an oversized tugboat or possibly an old icebreaker converted into a science vessel. On the aft deck a helipad could be seen, the only indication that it deserved a place as anything more than a tugboat.

Sam was reassured by the familiar sight of his ship. The Maria Helena had been doing research into the ever-changing water quality of the overcrowded Mediterranean as it passed through the Strait of Gibraltar. He'd ordered her skipper, Matthew Sutherland, to wrap up their project and quickly move it to the French Riviera in case they were needed.

Sam and Tom walked confidently down the tiny street. He watched as a beautiful woman in a flowery yellow dress walked by a popular restaurant, le Royal. Although it was only just hitting eleven-

thirty in the morning, the place was already thriving with tourists and locals. The aroma of strong coffee and freshly baked French bread filled the air.

Sam smiled, enjoying the atmosphere.

It was hardly the place for a business meeting with the head of a criminal organization. A police car was parked in front of the restaurant. Two police officers in their early forties stood armed with SP2022 handguns at their hips, and each had a Ruger machinegun held at the ready, as though waiting for something.

“Do they look overly eager for police officers in Nice?” Sam asked.

Tom looked up from where he’d been distracted by the flirtatious smile of a tall brunette. “Who?”

“The police out the front of the restaurant. Do you think they appear unusually ready with their weapons in a place like this?”

“We live in a dangerous world. Who can say?” Tom replied, nonplussed.

“I can say. My guess is they work for him.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Tom began walking toward the entrance. “Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

The two walked into le Royale.

A waiter immediately approached them and said in perfect English, “Mr. Reilly and Mr. Bower, I presume?”

Sam nodded his head.

“Good. Right this way. He’s waiting for you.”

The waiter sat them out the front of the restaurant, in the sidewalk seating area. There, a man in his fifties was waiting by himself.

The man was slim and wore casual clothes, made by a local and impeccable designer. He had a full head of brown hair. If there was any greying, the man had dyed it well. With blue eyes and a bright smile, the man stood up to greet them, as though they were old friends catching up over lunch.

“Sam Reilly?” he asked.

“Yes.” Sam replied, offering his hand. “And this is my friend Tom Bower.”

The man took it cordially, and said, “My name is Vincent Dubois. I have taken the liberty of ordering you both something for

lunch. I own the restaurant, but even so, I believe the food is excellent. Do you have time for lunch?"

Sam looked around and saw the police officers staring at him. "Of course."

"Good. Because I cannot do business with a man who dismisses a good meal at lunchtime." Vincent laughed at his own joke. "Wine?"

He poured three glass before Sam could reply.

"And I take it you own the police officers too?"

"We are a civilized society my friend. I cannot own the police officers. Let's just say that I merely pay into their social fund each week, so they have a vested interest in my wellbeing." Vincent smiled. "Tell me. Why are you interested in the Arcane Stone?"

Sam took in the man's personality in an instant. He was being played with. "For the same reason as everyone else, of course. I want to find Atlantis."

"But surely you must know that Atlantis was a myth, created by Plato to torment the gullible minds of the Greeks and now you Americans?"

"Ah, that's most likely true, but I have a friend who has found herself in a certain kind of trouble, having gone looking for Atlantis, and now it's my job to get her out of it. And you just happen to have the only clue that points to where she might have gone."

"Ah, so you are not so gullible after all, Mr. Reilly. You are doing this for honor? That is good. I have it. You may have it for the agreed upon price of 10 million euros. Would you like to examine it?"

"Yes, please."

Vincent made the slightest of curt nods, and a waiter came out an instant later. Removing the cloche revealed what Sam had come for.

The Arcane Stone.

It glowed unnaturally orange. It wasn't gold, but it wasn't copper either. And the luster was no less impressive than had it been pure gold. Even at the glance, Sam knew he was looking at the real Arcane Stone. He'd never seen real orichalcum, but this matched every description that Plato revealed of the alloy found only in Atlantis.

"I'm going to have to take a small sample for metallurgical analysis."

"Of course. But if you break it you bought it."

“Only if it is indeed the Arcane Stone.”

“I may be a criminal, but I’m no fool. I don’t try to rip people off for 10 million euros. My reputation is worth more than that!”

Sam used his laser cutter and removed a fraction off the base, no more than a quarter of an ounce. “I will need to have this examined by a metallurgist before I make the purchase.”

“Of course.”

Sam nodded his head to another diner, who stood up, left the bill and came over to pick up the tiny metal fragment.

“I’ll have the results for you within the hour Mr. Reilly.”

“Thank you, Dr. Ramsay.”

Vincent smiled at him. “A friend of yours?”

“You didn’t think I was going to entrust 10 million euros to my high school level chemistry, did you?”

“No, of course not.”

The waiter returned to remove the artifact, and replace it with two plates. Sam put a hand on the artifact. “I’m afraid I’m going to need to have that stay right here. Not that I mistrust you or your men, Vincent, but I wouldn’t want anyone to feel the temptation to cheat me, either.”

The waiter looked to Vincent for direction. “It’s okay Luc. You can leave it on the table. After all, they’ll pay for it before they leave.”

Sam looked down at the escargot with just the slightest hint of uncertainty. Next to it, the waiter left the artifact, glowing with a rich orange and red luster.

Vincent smiled. “Please, be my guest. Start eating. My lunch is still coming.”

Sam’s stomach rumbled at the strange sight, but he forced himself to eat them. Despite its appearance, his lunch tasted every bit as divine as he’d expected from fine French cuisine.

“Delicious!” Sam said.

Vincent smiled. “Good, because I’ve always found them disgusting. That’s why I ordered the lobster.”

Chapter Nineteen

Parked facing a southerly direction, the engine of a single all-terrain vehicle idled at the onramp of Boulevard Jean Jaurès. Inside, Tom sat in the driver's seat. Elise had arranged for the car to be left there for him at the edge of the old town of Le Vieux Nice. It was a Hummer H1, the original military version of the all-terrain vehicle, equipped with all the modern conveniences of a military vehicle, such as waterproof and gas proof interior with its own air supply, bullet proof windows and anti-mine undercarriage. Elise wasn't taking any more chances with their lives.

Tom had left Sam inside the restaurant, happily conversing with Vincent in fluent French, while he waited for approval to make the purchase of the Arcane Stone. Sam and Vincent had agreed on a standard untraceable Bitcoin transaction to a predetermined digital wallet of Vincent's choosing. When Tom had left, it amazed him that Sam should so readily befriend the head of such a notorious criminal organization.

Sometimes he forgot that Sam had lived a multitude of lives for a very long time. In fact, when he thought about it, Tom had no real idea when Sam had begun splitting his lives. He now knew about the event in Afghanistan in 2003, when Sam had been recruited for his specialized knowledge and skills set – Tom could only imagine that it was a euphemism for rich spy. Then there was the life he shared with his father, James Reilly who owned Global Shipping, the third largest cargo company in the world. James had a God complex, in which he really did feel he was superior to everyone. Last there was the guy he'd grown up with, competed with throughout high school and in the Corps – he was the man whose word was his honor, a binding contract without reservation; who had a powerful sense of duty that guided his every judgement.

But what about this man? The one that could purchase from a ruthless criminal, because he needed something from the man. Tom wondered how far this Sam Reilly would break the rules if he needed to. And then he knew he'd already had the answer – the depths of the darkest world.

Tom's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his cell phone.

"Was it what you were after?" Tom asked.

"Yes. You can pass on to my banker that I'd like to complete the transfer and to please have the engines on my jet running, so we can leave."

It was a prearranged code. If the artifact had been a fake, Sam would have told him to transfer the money, and Tom would have broken into the restaurant with his hired men.

“Very good, Sam. I’ll let them know.”

Tom quickly contacted Elise.

“He’s happy.”

Ten minutes later Sam climbed into the Hummer next to him.

Côte d’Azur International Airport was just four miles southwest from them. There, a private jet was waiting, its turbines already turning in preparation of their arrival.

“Did that seem a little too easy to you?” Tom asked, pulling onto Boulevard Jean Jaurès.

“No, why?”

“Oh come on, Sam!” Tom laughed. “We just went and bought ourselves a 10-million-euro ancient artifact from the head of a mafia whose reputation lauded him for being the most dangerous, influential and least forgiving head of any current criminal organization in Europe.

“Yes, but people like that love people like us...” Sam looked at him. “Well, people like me. The very rich kind of buyers. I wasn’t there to haggle. I knew the product I wanted and I was willing to meet his terms to buy it. Why wouldn’t it go well?”

“Because he’s a criminal! And criminals don’t play by the normal rules.”

“Trust me. His reputation is more valuable to him than the 10 million euros.”

Sam pulled out his hand gun, a Glock with silencer. He checked the cartridge was fully loaded and removed the safety.

“What is it?” Tom asked.

Sam looked like a kid preparing to play cowboys and Indians. “Nothing. It’s just our friends, the police officers. The ones who don’t play by the rules have been following us. That’s all.”

Tom looked into the rearview mirror.

Around three cars behind them, he saw the police car on their tail.

“Damn it! Why didn’t you say something?”

“I thought I just did!”

“I meant when you first saw them.” Tom put his foot down and

started increasing the gap.

Instantly he saw the blue lights of the police car begin to flash, followed by the annoying drone of its siren.

Tom sped up again.

“Do you have a plan for outsmarting the police?” Sam asked.

“Those aren’t the police, they’re Vincent’s men.”

“All the same. They’re driving a police car and sounding very much like police officers.”

“So, what’s your plan?”

“Let’s pull over and see what they want?”

“That’s your plan? Are you nuts?”

“We’re virtually driving a tank. What the hell are they going to do to us?”

Resigned to see what happened, Tom shrugged his shoulders and pulled over.

The police car pulled up in front of them and parked at an angle to their front, preventing them from returning to the main road again.

Both officers got out of the car and calmly walked up to the driver’s side door.

Tom lowered the window and smiled at the police officer. His name tag displayed the very non-French name, Jason. “I’m sorry. Was my brake light out?”

“Vincent says he’s gonna need the Arcane Stone back.”

Sam smiled unsympathetically. “Well gentlemen, you’d better tell Vincent to find another one, because we’re not interested in selling right now. Maybe in a few weeks, if he makes the right offer.”

The police officer at the open window smiled stupidly, and then pointed his Ruger machinegun inside the Hummer. “I suggest you reconsider my offer. I don’t think Vincent’s going to....”

Sam fired his Glock at point blank range – blowing the man’s head back with three rounds before he finished his sentence.

Tom put his foot down, and the massive Hummer rammed through the parked police car.

“Holy shit! Sam, a little heads up next time would be appreciated, before you start shooting people.”

“Only amateurs want to chat. Didn’t they teach you to kill while they talk?” Sam said as he looked behind them. “On that subject. His partner’s right on our tail again, and unless I’m much mistaken, he’s

brought friends.”

Tom looked in his rearview mirror – there were at least four other crooked cop cars on the chase. “You got any plans?”

Bullets harmlessly raked the back end of the Hummer.

“Good to see this thing lives up to its expectation.”

“Yeah, but for how long? I’m sure they’ll find something a little more powerful to fire at us if we overstay our welcome.”

“Let’s not wait and find out.”

A split second later the loud report of a sniper rifle echoed through Nice, quickly followed by a second and then a third one.

Behind them, two police cars veered off the road – their drivers shot dead.

“Who the hell did that?” Tom said, weaving in and out of traffic, trying to increase the gap that had been created.

“That... I have no idea,” Sam replied. “No one aboard the Maria Helena could shoot like that. Perhaps Genevieve, but Matthew tells me she’s on leave. It might be Veyron? I wouldn’t put it past him to be an expert marksman.”

Another four shots fired in quick succession and the drivers of each of the remaining four cars died.

“Whoever it is, they’ve given me a chance to get clear. We should be at the airport in another few minutes.”

And then Tom hit his brakes hard.

An overturned garbage truck blocked the entire road. A road worker in high visibility work gear redirected them to the off ramp and back into the rabbit warren of the old city of Le Vieux Nice.

“That can’t just be bad luck!” Tom griped.

“No, I’d say Vincent’s bribes run pretty deep in this town.”

He turned into the first left, hoping to avoid the old town with its tiny streets and narrow lanes. In the rearview mirror Tom saw a large bulldozer turn to follow them. “We can outrun it!” At the end of that street, he turned right.

Taking him back to the center of the old town, near where they’d had lunch.

And into a dead end.

Chapter Twenty

Sam looked up ahead.

There was no way the Hummer was going to go any further. Behind them, the bulldozer had raised its digger menacingly.

“End of the ride kids,” Tom said.

They both quickly got out and tried to make their way further down the laneway. The bulldozer drove over the top of their Hummer, squashing it like an aluminum can.

Sam looked at his Glock. It felt highly inadequate against their attacker.

The driver of the bulldozer stopped momentarily to lower the digger so it scraped along the ground and the walls of the buildings. Sam looked around. There were no doors or windows that might provide an escape route. If they waited where they were, they’d be dead in a matter of seconds.

Sam took careful aim at the man high up in the driver’s seat – and fired.

The first shot went wide by several inches.

He carefully aimed and fired again. This time it was a dead on target, but the bulldozer’s windscreen had been designed to protect the driver from high velocity projectiles likely to be thrown up during road construction. The bullet sent a ripple like cracked ice through the windscreen, but never came close to hitting the driver.

Sam fired another three shots.

Finding himself out of ammo, he dropped his clip and loaded another, emptying it to the driver’s windscreen.

But the driver continued.

High above them in the church tower Sam recognized Vincent with a sniper rifle. For a moment he expected to be the next one shot dead.

The sound of another loud report echoed through the narrow lane. Sam looked toward Tom, expecting to find him killed. Instead, the driver slumped forward. The bulldozer then turned slightly to the right, and imbedded itself into the brick wall.

Vincent quickly slid down a rope and approached them. “I believe that’s all of them. You should be free to catch your flight.”

Tom looked at Sam. “I guess that’s how he manages to hold his position as the head of the crime syndicate.”

Sam smiled and in perfect French said, "Thank you. We owe you one."

"No you don't. You paid 10 million on the black market for an archeological device. We may be criminals, but we don't like other people stealing from our clients. After all, if word gets around that we're running a corrupt shop here, people won't want to do business with us anymore."

"Thank you." Sam smiled at the crook. "If it's all the same. I'll have someone wire you another million dollars in Bitcoins as a bonus."

"Keep it," Vincent replied.

"There's going to be trouble here. A lot of people died. It's going to be on the news everywhere. Someone's going to want answers," Sam said.

"I wouldn't worry too much about me. I have deep pockets, and almost everyone from the ground up in this town owes me something. You go. I'll fix it."

"Okay, thanks," Sam said, offering his hand.

Vincent took it and replied, "Oh, and another thing. You might want to know that we had strong interest from another buyer recently. He'd even offered to outbid you earlier today, but I told him it was already sold. Said he could double the pay if I got it back for him. Probably why some of my men worked with whoever these mercenaries are to steal it from you. Either way, the man seemed pretty determined. You might be in trouble. I'd hate for you to have another close call with an accident."

"Thanks for the heads up. Did you happen to get his name?"

"Yes. Andrew Brandt."

Sam had never heard of the man before, but the surname was too much of a coincidence to ignore. "Okay, thanks. I'll keep my eyes open."

Chapter Twenty-One

Andrew Brandt accepted his secure message.

“Did you get it?”

“No. They got to it first.”

“What about Jason? I thought he had a plan? After all, we paid him a big enough advance that he should have got the job done!”

“Jason’s dead.”

Andrew wanted to punch something. “He’s lucky. I don’t take well to failures. Especially two in the one day.”

“What do you want me to do, boss?”

“Stay with the good Dr. Swan, and see where they get to. If you find out anything more let me know.”

“Very good, Mr. Brandt. And where are you going to be?”

“I’m heading to Nepal, to fix up your fuckup.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Five Treasures of Snow – Nepal.

Three Weeks Remaining

The town of Lukla came into view as the Dornier Do 228 banked to the right and commenced its final approach into Tenzing-Hillary airport, Nepal. High above the steep-sided Dudh Khosi valley, snow-covered mountains appeared to surround the aircraft. The highest among them, Mount Everest, stood proud to the left of their horizon.

The twin-turboprop STOL, which stood for short takeoff and landing, had been specifically modified as one of four commercial aircraft currently in service capable of transporting climbers to the closest airport to Mount Everest base camp. Ahead of them, a single runway of just 1729 feet sloped in a not-so-gradual upwards direction, terminating in a near vertical rock wall dwarfed by a mountain, which made the prospect of a successful go around due to a short final impossible.

Sam Reilly nudged Tom, who snored loudly.

Despite being six foot four, Tom Bower had somehow managed to stretch his strong, lanky body out over the pile of climbing bags stowed in front of him, and remained sound asleep.

“Get up Tom, you’re about to miss it!”

Tom purposely rolled to his right, away from Sam, and replied, “Miss what?”

“We’re coming in to land at Tenzing-Hillary airport!”

“That’s great, buddy,” he replied, and then pulled his climbing hood over his head and returned to his deep sleep.

“Don’t you want to watch the landing? This was once voted the most dangerous airport in the world!”

“I flew into here years ago when I did some high altitude training with the Corps.” Tom’s voice sounded almost bored. “It’s perfectly safe, so long as the pilots don’t screw it up.”

The plane jolted with the constant buffeting as they descended closer toward the town of Lukla. There were only two runways. Runway 06 for landings, and its reciprocal, 24, for takeoffs. One way in and one out. Sam watched with a mixture of respect and awe, as the two Nepalese pilots worked fastidiously in the cockpit to bring them safely toward the runway. This meant that, despite the strong crosswind, the pilots had no other option than to land the plane.

They brought the nose down at the last minute, and braked hard.

The aircraft came to a rolling stop with no more than 60 feet remaining before reaching the rock ending of the runway. The pilot then turned the plane to the small square of tarmac, where he came to a complete stop.

Sam nudged Tom again. "You missed it! Impressive landing. Nicely done."

Tom rolled over. "We're here are we? Damn. I just got back to sleep!"

Sam grabbed his climbing bag and two duffle bags' worth of equipment. They weren't travelling light, but they would have more than enough help to carry it all. At the bottom of the plane's airsteps, a man in a pilot's uniform stood holding a banner with the words, "Welcome Reilly Party." The man had blond hair, pale white skin and blue eyes, making his appearance distinctly different than the local Nepalese pilots, or Sherpas.

"Hello. Mr. Reilly?"

"Please, call me Sam." He offered his hand. "This is my friend, Tom."

"Welcome to Nepal." The man smiled warmly and accepted Sam's handshake. "My name is Dmitry Grekov."

"You're Russian?" Sam noted, out of interest.

"Yes. Does that surprise you?"

"I thought Nepal was a little more parochial with those who they employ high up in the mountains?"

Dmitry picked up their duffle bags and began walking toward the chartered helicopter. "Yes, they like to support the employment of the local people first. But since the Eurocopter AS350 B3 came into operation, all that changed."

"Really, how so?" Sam asked.

"The B3 is capable of operating above 23,000 feet, raising the mountain rescue ceiling to new heights. With good cellular reception now being maintained throughout the mountains, the opportunity of high altitude rescue has become a reality. Both search-and-rescue and commercialization in the region are taking another large, if lurching, step forward. B3s have been a fixture for decades in other mountain destinations, especially the Alps, where they have saved hundreds of lives. But in Nepal, B3s had until recently seen limited use. Consequently, they were short on high altitude pilots. And so I came

here. I have been here nearly three years now, and I like it.”

“And you have plenty of experience flying at high altitude?” Sam asked.

“More than anyone else.” Dmitri smiled graciously. “That is, more than any other alpine pilot still alive. I have clocked more than 10 000 hours of high altitude flying. Nearly 3,000 of that is above 20,000 feet.”

“That’s impressive,” Sam agreed. “Good, because where we’re going we may need every bit of that experience.”

“And where would you like to go?” Dmitri raised his right eyebrow, out of curiosity more than apprehension. He hadn’t come to the Himalayas to be careful.

“I’m not sure yet. But for now, I need to have a good vantage point to view the Five Treasures of Snow.”

Tom appeared to lose interest in the story as he became distracted by an airplane taking off. A DHC-6 Twin Otter was picking up speed on the tiny runway. On its side, in large lettering were the words: Yeti Airlines. “Christ, almighty! Sam did you know that we landed on that runway?”

“I might have mentioned something about that Tom.”

“And here is your chartered helicopter,” Dmitri said. “As requested, I kept your climbing party small. You both said you were capable of carrying your own equipment while you climb?”

“Yes.”

There were two small mountain men standing by the side of the Eurocopter. Both appeared much older than Sam had expected for climbing guides. The younger one appeared maybe forty, while the older one was at least sixty.

“Sam. Tom. May I introduce your guides, Lakpa and Pemba? Two of the most capable climbers in all the Himalayas. Legend has it their family have been living in these mountains for thousands of years.”

Sam and Tom both shook their hands.

“Do you speak English?” Sam asked.

“I do, but my father does not,” Lakpa replied.

Sam examined the two men. There was nothing special about them. They wore expensive western climbing clothes, and appeared smaller than he’d expect for people who were capable of climbing to great heights while carrying huge weights. One appeared too old for climbing – at least sixty. The other, too young. For a moment, he

wondered if he was being duped. He'd paid top money for his guides, and he'd been explicit that he wanted the very best. For where he was going, they would earn every penny.

He shook the worry from his mind. It didn't matter. They would be better than either he or Tom, and what they really needed wasn't an expert climber, they needed a guide to help them interpret the directions of the Arcane Stone.

Dmitri looked at him, a curious expression on his face. "Tell me, Sam. Where would you like to go?"

"Do you know where Tiger Hill is?"

"Deerjing? Of course. It's said to have the most exquisite view of the Five Treasures of Snow of anywhere in the Himalayas."

"Good. Take us there."

"It's in Sikkim, though." Dmitri looked up from walking around the helicopter and performing his preflight checks. "I can arrange the... ah... visas, but it will cost more money."

"We'll pay."

"Then climb aboard. We're off to see the Five Treasures of Snow in all their majestic beauty."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sam stared at the Five Treasures of Snow from Tiger Hill. More than a dozen tourists looked up at the great mountains. In the morning, the place would be overrun with hundreds of them, all searching for the perfect shot of the golden peaks at sunrise. He took out his tablet and checked some notes that Billie had made. This was the spot. That much was certain, but where was the rock?

He looked at Lakpa, the younger of the two Sherpas. "Have you ever been here before?"

"Yes, many years ago. We came to pray to the Five Treasures of Snow."

"Have you ever seen a rock like this?"

Lakpa examined the old drawings of the rock. "Yes. The locals say that it is a holy rock. It is made from granite, which is not found for hundreds of miles from here. They say that it was a gift from their gods."

"Then why don't the crowds of people form there?" Sam asked, with genuine curiosity.

"Because the original people of these mountains, the Kusunda people, have forbidden it. They say that only the true ancients of the region are allowed to go there and pray." Lakpa looked up at Sam and asked, "Why do you ask?"

"Because that's where I need to be tomorrow when the sun first strikes the Five Treasures of Snow."

Lakpa frowned. "I'm afraid it's forbidden."

"We have to be there for tomorrow's sunrise. If we aren't, then we have wasted our time with this entire expedition."

Lakpa spoke to his father in his native language in rapid succession. And then looked back at Sam and Tom. "My father says, if it is that important to you, he will show you where it is. But that we can't go with you. The Gods will be angry, and he strongly advises you not to climb the mountains afterwards."

"I understand the risk. But I need to do so."

Lakpa nodded. "I understand."

They reached the granite boulder approximately two hours later. It was west of Tiger Hill by a further two miles. Their guides refused to climb it, or even walk to its base. Lakpa advised them that he and his father would be resting near the helicopter after sunrise tomorrow.

Sam and Tom both thanked him and began climbing the boulder.

It was roughly the size of a small house, and appeared as though God himself had placed it there. The hills of Sikkim and specifically Tiger Hill consist of half-schistose rocks, producing a shallow brown clay soil, highly susceptible to erosion. By contrast, the hard and massive granite boulder had survived thousands of years of erosion from the environment, with little to no change in its appearance.

Sam reached the top of the ancient boulder first. He looked north toward the Five Treasures of Snow. The main peak and its immediate satellites take the form of a giant cross straddling the borders of three countries – Nepal, Tibet, and the once independent kingdom but now Indian state of Sikkim. From what he'd read, the great cluster of peaks was highly glaciated and cradled five major glacial systems. Three of these, the Zemu, Talung, and Rathong, lie to the east of the massif and flow into Sikkim, eventually feeding the mighty Tista River. In Nepal, to the west, the Kangchenjunga and Yalung glaciers form the major sources of the Tamur River. The region is called Five Treasures of Snow after its five high peaks, and has always been worshipped by the people of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

"This is it," Sam said, reverently.

Tom stared up at the mountains in the distance, his face pensive.

"It's going to be somewhere up there, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so. Anywhere else, someone would have found it by now."

The two men made camp on the rock, and that night the two of them ate a dinner of hot stew before going to bed early in preparation for the next day. The sky was clear, and from their vantage point the millions of stars blended into the horizon, so that it was hard for your imagination not to run wild, and your spirit dream.

"Do you think she's all right?" Tom asked.

"Billie? Are you kidding me? That woman's tougher than rusty nails and smarter than either of us. She'll have a plan. They won't kill her. Certainly not until they've found Atlantis. And while she holds that card above them, she will have all the time in the world to find a solution."

"And that solution is that we reach Atlantis first."

"And we will," Sam said and then went to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

At 4 a.m., Sam woke up and prepared for sunrise.

Tom drank from a warm thermos of tea.

“Based on the translations of the ancient texts that Billie discovered on the walls of Atlantis, when placed at the center of this rock Arcane Stone would allow the viewer to redirect the sunlight of the first light to the precise location of the secret opening. Impossible to visualize from the ground, it allows a climber to descend into its heart.”

“But if the sun changes based on the time of the year, surely it must now be inaccurate?”

“That’s true. But the ancient Atlantean people were smarter than you give them credit for. If you look closely at our new toy, you will see that it rotates around an axis, in which twelve different settings may be selected.”

“The months of the year?”

“Precisely.”

Sam handed Tom the device to examine again.

He rotated its base with the sound of a small click and said, “Twelve settings. The first being highlighted by a snowflake, presumably winter solstice and a sun for summer solstice?”

“It’s the start of July, so shall we set it to the next setting after Summer?”

“No, if the Sun reflects summer solstice, then we need to rotate one setting backwards, for the month before the hottest day of the year.”

“Good point.”

Sam cleared away some of the petals of the giant rhododendron flowers, which had built up on the large boulder.

Then he felt it.

His fingers clearly dipped into the middle of the rock.

It wasn’t a deep indentation, but certainly too specific to be caused by natural erosion. Once he’d cleared it of leaves and petals, he placed the base of the Arcane Stone into the groove.

The stem sunk perfectly into it and the device locked.

“Now what?” Tom asked.

“Now, we wait for the sun to rise.”

At precisely 5:05 the sun came over the mountain.

Sam stared through the looking glass.

Instantly the orange glow of the sunlight moved from where it shone on the first mountain to midway up the third – Kangchenjunga.

Sam took a GPS Laser Pointer and marked the location on the mountain.

“Well, Tom. There’s our mountain.”

“You’re certain?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s go inform our guides that they’re helping us climb the world’s most lethal mountain.”

An hour later, Sam found the two guides sitting by the helicopter. Dmitri, their pilot, was asleep in the cockpit.

“Lakpa, we’ve picked our mountain.”

“Good. Which one?”

“Kangchenjunga.”

“Kangchenjunga? And what year would you like to climb?”

“This. Starting today, to be exact.”

The man laughed, and then stopped suddenly. “You are serious?”

“Yes. How long will it take?”

“A week,” Lakpa said. Then, turning to speak to his father, who, he advised them, was the best climber in all the Himalayas.

The two conversed in their native tongue. A short, fast, discussion.

“My father says you are both very brave. And must be great climbers to even consider such a mountain. Where have you climbed previously?”

“You can tell him that we have climbed extensively through the Dolomite Mountain Ranges – last season to be exact.”

Lakpa spoke with his father and then back to them.

“My father says the Dolomite Mountains are excellent for technical skills, but you need endurance as well as skills to climb Kangchenjunga.”

Sam grinned.

He wasn’t about to tell his new found admirer that his recent climbing experience, in its entirety involved a three-day weekend hike

along the Via Ferrata, or iron stairway, in Italy while searching for The Magdalena – a Jewish airship lost while escaping Nazi Germany.

“You can tell him that Tom and I are exceedingly fit people. We may not be the greatest climbers that your father has ever set eyes on, but we have stamina and a purpose for a climb that will drive us to succeed where others have failed.”

“My father says you speak like a true Tiger. But only a Jackal takes money from a fool.”

“Then tell him that he will be a very rich Jackal, because I have a lot to give, and a purpose that necessitates climbing that mountain. I have to find an ancient temple that I hope will provide answers that may save my friend’s life.”

Pemba faced Sam, and spoke in perfect English. “I will take you up the Kangchenjunga. But when you fail, I will not risk my life, nor the lives of my men, trying to save your stupid self. Is that agreed?”

“Yes, perfectly.” Sam laughed. “You speak English?”

“I’ve been guiding English people over these mountains since I was eight years old. Of course I speak bloody English. I only pretend ignorance, because I can’t stand to speak to tourists. But you, I see, are seeking the ancient archives of Atlantis.”

Tom opened his mouth to speak and then stopped himself, unable to find the right words.

Sam said, “So, you know about Atlantis?”

“Of course I do. My people once descended from there.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Tsoka Monastery was perched at 12,000 feet and nearing the end of the Goecha La Route. Kanchenjunga stood proud behind them, surrounded by other majestic snow-covered mountains.

Sam shook Dmitri's hand and said, "We'll give you a call in a few months for our return flight."

"No problem. I will be waiting for it. Have you decided on a mountain to climb?"

"No," Sam lied. "At this stage we're going to hike the Goecha La Route and acclimatize with the plan to summit one of these mountains before the end of the climbing season."

"Good luck."

After the helicopter left, the small party began its long walk toward Kanchenjunga. They had more altitude to make up before they reached the place where they would climb. Pemba had told them both it would be impossible to climb the mountain without at least a week to acclimatize.

Sam had protested that he had no intention of reaching the summit. Only about one third of the way up. Even so, Pemba provided him with the ultimatum – "Hike in or find another guide." And so, they began their journey.

It took them through a thick rhododendron forest, and fir, festooned with lichen and moss, which gave it a truly magical air. At Phedang they passed a large grassy clearing surrounded by large purple rhododendrons.

Several hours into the journey, Pemba and Lapka led by hundreds of feet. Tom trailed only just behind Sam, not because he couldn't keep up, but instead because he was enjoying the magnificence of his environment. The Clematis Montana, with its typical purple flowers, encapsulated the mountainside.

Tom caught up with Sam. "What do you think?"

"I think it's beautiful here."

"Not about the place." Tom looked up ahead at their guides. "About them?"

"They seem competent so far."

"No. What do you make of their story about descending from Atlantis?"

"I believe them. How else would they know about it? We hadn't

told them anything about why we wanted to climb Kanchenjanga.”

Tom looked concerned. “What about their looks? They don’t even look German.”

“Who said that the people of Atlantis were the great ancestors of Germany?”

“Hitler did, when he sent Himmler to go in search of the perfect Aryan bloodline.”

“Hitler said a lot of things that weren’t true when he was driving his propaganda machine. You don’t think he was going to say, ‘Hey, here’s another race who were exceptional. They look nothing like us, but they were really clever.’”

“Fair point. I just assumed because we found the Arcane Stone in the Dutch National Archives...”

Sam began explaining. “Neolithic tools found in the Kathmandu Valley indicate that people have been living in the Himalayan region for at least eleven thousand years. Coincidence?”

“Are you saying these simple folk are descendants of Atlantis?”

“It’s unlikely,” Sam mused. “But then again. Even you must admit that the coincidence is uncanny. And it just so happens that the oldest known population layer is believed to be represented by the Kusunda people. Do you know where the highest population of Kusunda live?”

“Let me guess. Somewhere in the Five Treasures of Snow?”

“Right you are!”

“So, if these were truly descendants of the ancient people of Atlantis... one question... what happened to them? I mean, look at them. They’re simple mountain people. Living lives which have barely changed in the last 11,000 years. Don’t you think if they came from a master race that had significant powers and technologies back 11,000 years ago, wouldn’t they be living at the top of the world?”

Sam looked around. “They kind of are.”

“No, you know what I mean. If some disaster struck America and only a small portion of the population survived... those who did survive, their descendants wouldn’t be living in huts!”

“Wouldn’t they?”

“Course not.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’ve come from a civilization that knows about internal plumbing, smartphones, cars! We would be doing just fine.”

“Yeah, but how many Americans, living the dream, necessarily know how to create it? If you knock off too many, the civilization has to take a step back and look after the priorities. Agriculture, simply supplying enough food and water to live. All the perks of the smartphone generation are pretty much useless if you can’t eat.”

“And so you’re saying that the Kusunda people are the last survivors of Atlantis?”

“I’m just saying it’s possible. When you look at the history that their earliest background is approximately 11,000 years ago, it seems like a remarkable coincidence, doesn’t it?”

“But why here, then? It’s such a hard place to live. Why not further down the mountains?”

“Why not indeed?” Sam looked up at the mountains above. “What if they knew something we don’t know about our future?”

“Do you think as far back as 11,000 years ago they were planning on avoiding a second disaster?”

“I don’t know. But why else would they go to such lengths, as a small group of survivors, to build a new Atlantis in such an inhospitable place?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Landing at the edge of the village, Andrew thought he could imagine these people living this way for thousands of years. He'd gone back in time to when life was simple. Andrew Brandt scrambled out of the passenger seat of the B3 Eurocopter. With him were two helicopters and fourteen mercenaries armed with AK47s. Given the stakes, he wasn't taking any chances.

The monks of the Tsoka Monastery looked at them with worried faces. They were simple people who had lived on the mountain for thousands of years, but that didn't mean they didn't recognize evil when it arrived.

"Dmitri, you're sure it was them?"

"Certain. There were two of them, and they had no idea which mountain they wanted to summit, only that they needed to reach Tiger Hill before sunrise. Then, once they had viewed the sunrise they returned to the helicopter and asked me to drop them as high up the mountain as possible."

"Are you certain this is where they went?"

"Of course I am. I'm telling you, this was where I left them."

"Where did they go from here?"

"No idea. They said they were going climbing for the season. They had my number and said they would call when they were ready. They paid well, and knew I'd come the second they asked."

"All right gentlemen. Everyone out. Let's see what these monks remember about our friends, shall we?"

"What do you want me to do, boss? Shall I shut her down?" the pilot asked.

"No, keep your rotors spinning. I want to take off again as soon as we know where they've gone."

Andrew stepped out of the helicopter.

He carried an AK 47. It was an old, but effective, weapon. And more importantly, it was one of the most well-known weapons on the planet, which meant it would serve the purpose of creating terror. And frightened people told the truth.

His men, also armed with AK47s, walked towards the huts. The villagers scattered. An old man was the only one who couldn't run.

"Did you see other white people like us?"

"No, not like you. They weren't carrying guns."

“But did you see where they went?”

The old man looked concerned. “I’m not sure where they went. Some of our local men helped them. I think they were going on a climbing expedition. I do not know where.”

Andrew looked at one of his men. “Go find me one of the children.”

Andrew smiled at the old man while he waited a couple minutes for his men to return with a crying child of around four.

He smiled at the small boy. “Did you see where the other white people went?”

The boy shook his head.

“How about you, old man? Has your memory improved?”

The man’s toothless smile was the only response.

Andrew pulled out the pistol from his holster and pointed it at the child’s head. “Okay, everyone. I’m going to kill this boy in ten seconds if I don’t get some answers that I’m looking for. Then I’m going to find another child. Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six...”

At six second he pulled the trigger, and the rock next to the child’s head exploded.

The child screamed, and the man holding him, fought to keep him still.

The boy then bit the soldier’s hand and ran.

“Holy shit, Andrew!” Dmitri said. “You nearly killed an innocent kid. Do you really want to go through with this?”

Andrew leveled the gun with the running child and took aim. “I would kill every single one of their kids, if I thought it might provide a lead to the location of Atlantis.”

His finger began to squeeze the trigger.

“Wait!” It was a woman who came running.

“Yes?”

“I know where they’ve gone.”

“Good. Take us there.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Edward Worthington looked around the ancient Atlantean vault, where their history had been recorded over the millennia. Several tunnels lined the passageways. The biggest room of them all had walls and walls of ancient writings, followed by circles of information on the ceiling, which he recognized as being the same pictographic text he'd seen in drawing of Atlantis.

At the end of the room were three fully decomposed bodies, the remnants of Himmler's last expedition. The man who'd started the Nazi SS had pursued his crazy idea to find the Atlantis people who shared the perfect Aryan bloodline.

The spear through their heads made him wonder if he was not wrong to come with only Dr. Swan and Mark, as his bodyguard.

Dr. Swan audibly gasped when she saw it. Not the remains, but the glowing pile next to them. It must have contained more than a thousand pieces of orichalcum – the ancient gold and copper alloy the Atlanteans once mined.

"They had to prepare themselves for the return of their city," Edward said, noticing Billie's astonishment. "When it came, the Atlantean survivors knew they would need gold to be in a position to make it great again, so they stockpiled what remained here."

"Yes. It must be worth a fortune."

"Forget about the gold. It's worthless if we can't find the solution to the code of Atlantis, in the midst of these thousands of ancient notes. Without that code, the sphere will be locked until it is too late. If we fail in our task, the gold will have no meaning to any of us!"

"It could take months to make sense of all of this."

Edward raised his voice. "We don't have months. We have a little less than three weeks."

He watched as Billie's shrewd mind explored the cavern.

"I've found it."

"What is it?"

"The code, to Atlantis, of course."

"That's wonderful news!"

"Only it's missing half of it."

"What do you mean, its missing half of it?"

“I was worried about this. In my earlier research, I found reference to two groups of Atlantean survivors. One went east and set up camp high in these Tibetan mountains, while the other went somewhere completely different, presumably west.”

“But to where?” Edward asked.

“The two groups must not have trusted each other not to steal the most valuable remnants of Atlantis. So consequently, they broke the code into two parts and split them between the two groups.”

“Fine. So what now, we need to know where the other group is?”

“Yes.”

“Here it is. A map to their other settlement.”

Edward studied the rudimentary map. The depiction of the African continent wasn’t exact, but nonetheless it was impossible to deny what he was seeing. He listened to her read the description. Only a few people on the planet knew how to read the ancient text. Dr. Swan, he noticed, knew more about it than she’d revealed to him in their previous discussion. It was obvious she was nearly fluent in the ancient language.

He watched as Billie took several pictures of the map on her tablet.

“Can we destroy the map now Dr. Swan?”

“I don’t see why. You and I are the only two people to know of its existence.”

“And Mark, but I pay him well enough to keep any secret. Even so, no reason to take chances. Mark, bring a grenade in here. I want this destroyed.”

“Very good, sir.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Edward watched as she marked some notes on one of the blank circles. “So you really can understand this?”

“I have an idea. They’re similar to something I saw inside the Mayan pyramid beneath the ocean in the Gulf of Mexico. I just wanted to test my theory.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Well, if I’m right...” Dr. Swan said while she ran her fingers along the grooves of the hieroglyphic, “then this is a map to the other group of descendants.”

“Other group of descendants?”

“Yes. As this building is testament to, not all died during the sinking of Atlantis. By the looks of things, it was decided to split the two groups up and send them in different directions to protect the knowledge of the future.”

Mark came back into the tunnel from the opening. “It’s time to go. We have company.”

“Andrew Brandt or Sam Reilly?” Edward asked, reaching for his binoculars.

“Sam Reilly. But if he’s this far up the mountain, you can be sure that Andrew won’t be far off.”

“How far away?”

“Less than a day’s climb. He’ll be here by nightfall!” Mark replied.

“Okay, we’ll leave soon.” Edward looked at Dr. Swan. “You want to go back for them, don’t you?”

Dr. Swan smiled at him. “They could help us.”

“You know that’s not possible, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Andrew’s gaining on us, Dr. Swan. And unless you like the concept of losing in this race, I suggest we come up with a plan to throw them off our tail.”

She paused, a piece of chalk in her hand.

And then wrote a note followed by several numbers in the ancient text, before writing in plain English: Love, From Billie.

Edward studied the numbers.

They were written in the ancient text he’d not fully mastered,

but the numbers were clear enough. There was something strangely familiar about them. They were GPS coordinates, of course. But where? Then it hit him.

“Very good, Dr. Swan. But don’t you think they’ll know that anything of any value was destroyed there more than a hundred years ago by the American expedition?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Above them, Sam Reilly thought he heard the distant sound of thunder. A crude signal of an avalanche, perhaps? Or worse, someone had beaten them to it. He looked above, where the opening to the cave should have been, another 6000 feet above them.

“Avalanche?” Tom asked.

“Maybe, but it must have been a long way off. If it was above us, we’d have known about it by now.”

“I almost thought it sounded like the echo of a grenade.”

“Then they’ve already beaten us to it?” The thought brought the urgency back into Sam’s mind. “Come on. We’re close. Maybe there’s still time to save her.”

It was early the next morning by the time they reached the opening to the Atlantean Archives. It was built by two rocks overlapping. From the air or the ground, it appeared as one only, but once you stood directly next to it, you could see that there was an opening. It wasn’t very large – big enough for only one person to slip through at a time.

Sam was the first to enter the cave.

He squeezed his broad shoulders through first, with his hands out in front of him, then wriggled until the rest of his body followed. Once on the other side, he was able to stand up in what appeared to be a large cavern. Dark as the deepest sea, and for a moment he thought that it was nothing more than a naturally-formed cave. A musky smell appeared to pervade the emptiness of the cavern. He struck a large glow stick and threw it into the cavern.

The room lit up with the bright glow of light.

“Tom, squeeze your lanky self in here. You’re going to want to see this!”

His friend shuffled into the room. “What have you found?” Tom stared up at the grand room and then said, “Holy shit! It’s Atlantis!”

The walls were massive, giving it the appearance of a football stadium more than a cavern, except for the fact that the roof was quite low. So much so that Sam found himself capable of easily running his hands along it as he walked. At least two hundred circles could be seen covering the roof, and a maze of pictographs and hieroglyphics inside them. The circles that formed the roof were carved from ivory. The walls themselves were made of stone, but a multitude of sapphires embedded in them glowed like stars under the glow stick’s reflection.

“What’s that scent?” Sam asked, as he walked forward. “It’s fresh. Whatever caused it has been here in recent weeks.”

“Musk. And its Billie’s cheap deodorant she uses on her expeditions. We must have only just missed her.”

They walked further into the cavern.

At the far end of the room the remains of four people appeared. They wore Nazis uniforms and the insignia of the Schutzstaffel – the elite SS guard. Sam looked down at their remains. “Who would have thought they were so close to finding Atlantis?”

“The Nazis?” Tom laughed. “What the hell would they want with an ancient civilization?”

“Heinrich Himmler, the man who started the original SS, believed strongly in the perfect bloodline and noble DNA. Like Adolf Hitler, he was obsessed with the concept that Germany came from a powerful bloodline. Throughout the war, they spent a fortune trying to find Atlantis, believing that Germany had originated from it.” Sam looked at them and shook his head. “Himmler made declarations that they had found Atlantis and were in the process of proving their pure heritage, but no one actually believed any of it. Everyone just assumed it was another one of Hitler’s propaganda machines working in overdrive.”

Tom looked at the spears that still rested inside each of the men. “Well, there’s a bit of useless trivia for your children. They got close, but look what they got for their efforts.”

“It’s a timely reminder to us not to become complacent here. This place, as with the real Atlantis, may still be protected by a number of booby traps.”

“That’s impossible. Surely their springs, coils, and firing mechanisms must have broken over the centuries?”

“Yes, but as we have already learned, there are still direct descendants of Atlantis very much alive and keen to protect the secrets stored here.”

Chapter Thirty

Tom stared at it in awe. “It could take us more than a year and an army of archeologists to make sense of this cavern, let alone where they have taken Billie.”

“The good news is this isn’t Atlantis,” Sam replied. “And that means they’ll want to keep Billie alive, and that we probably still have a chance. We just need to find where they’re headed.”

“Still, we’d have to get pretty lucky to make any sense of this in time to catch up. If they’ve already been and left, then we know they got whatever they need from here.”

“Yes, but whoever built this did so to be a library of their history. Therefore, we should find a logical sequence.” Sam scanned through the rows upon rows of circles, until he reached a blank area. “There. The circles are empty.”

“Meaning?”

“Those are empty folders, still yet to be filled with the writings of Atlantis,” Sam said while he studied the entry to the last circle. “It says that Atlantis is due to be activated again...”

“Activated again?” Tom looked surprised. “How do you know how to read ancient Atlantis texts?”

“Because this is the same language the Master Builders used.”

“Can you read what else it says?”

“Unless the proper code is input once more – and then it has some sort of date, but I can’t work it out. I can read the numbers but I have no idea about their calendar to make any sense of it.”

“Code to Atlantis? Input into what? Did these people have computers or something?”

“I have no idea,” Sam replied shaking his head. “Now I really wish Billie were here.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing when Atlantis becomes activated?” Tom suggested.

“Hang on a second. Over here.” Next to the strange symbol, Sam saw something that translated to: *Activation Dates for Atlantis*. There were five dates: 120040, 40200; 18007; 1000 and 23. “Look the periods between the dates are getting smaller each time.” Four of the dates had been scratched with stone, as though someone was writing them off a list of things to do. But one was still yet to happen.

“Yes, but what do they mean?”

“Beats me. I’m just translating.”

“18,000 – Could we be talking somewhere around 18,000 years ago?”

“No. I don’t even know if these are dates. Even if I were sure they were dates, it wouldn’t help us because it’s highly unlikely the Atlanteans used a measurement of time that exactly matches ours. And even then, if they did, we still don’t know that their math matches ours.”

“I thought math was supposed to be the one universal constant?”

“In principle it is. But there are a number of ways of doing things, and just because we liked the concept of base ten, doesn’t mean that other cultures did too. For example, the Mayans used base twelve, while numerous tribes around the world used base eight because they counted the spaces between their fingers to make the number eight, instead of the fingers.”

“So, you’re telling me we just have some random numbers that could mean anything, but most likely represent some time or event in the past?”

“That’s pretty much the gist of it.” Sam looked helpful and then said, “Or even the future.”

Tom stared at the ceiling again, without any recognition in any of it. “I just got an idea,” he said, handing Sam a piece of paper. “Write those numbers down for me. And the number at the end of the final circle. I’ll put them into your tablet while you decipher the rest. Maybe it can make the translation somehow, or at least make the reference to significant events in history?”

Sam handed him the numbers and Tom carefully typed them into the tablet and then ran a search for any similarities, order, or obvious codes. When that came up with nothing, he then ran the dates by significant archeological events.

Again, it came up with nothing.

It was a long shot, he knew. After all, the numbers were unlikely to relate to any dates based on current calendar dating systems. Then he realized how he could combine the tests to achieve a possible answer.

He assigned a random number against each date and then compared the difference between each of them with any known archeological events recorded. Big events, was what he was after, specifically. This time, the computer gave him a simple list.

He had no way of telling the time between each event on its

own, but now he could compare them all and the computer could determine a probable dating of the numbers they had found.

Tom stared at the simple answers.

His face turned pale, and his hands sweaty.

“What is it?”

“The numbers 18007 appears to match up with the date Atlantis sunk and more importantly, the end of the last Ice Age. Prior to that, the Atlantean year 40200 relates to the approximate start of the Ice Age. And 120040, seems pretty close to when the dinosaurs disappeared. Each time it was activated, an Ice Age either started or ceased. Either way, it didn’t work out so crash hot for the planet’s inhabitants.”

“You mean, this thing’s wiping the slate clean? It’s removing all creatures who have not succeeded in evolving to the next level?”

“That’s what it looks like to me, and it gets worse.”

“Really. How much worse can it get?”

Tom sighed. “So I put that final date into the computer...”

“And?”

“It says we have three weeks until it’s activated again.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Sam looked around the rest of the vast room in frustration.

“None of this helps us find Atlantis so we can rescue Billie.”

“Don’t forget working out how to stop Atlantis from activating and killing us all!” Tom reminded him.

“Yeah, there’s that too.”

“Okay, so let’s break this down. Billie tells me that this isn’t the first time you investigated the Master Builders. So, what’s your process?”

Sam began to list them. “Okay, I need to scan as many of these images onto the computer as we can and let the computer identify any references to the location of Atlantis. They only recently left, which means they found what they were looking for. So they either got really lucky, or it’s obvious.”

“Okay, I’ll get started.”

Within ten minutes Tom called out to him.

“Look at that!”

The ceiling was destroyed. Someone had intentionally blown up that section of the roof. Around a dozen circular ‘files’ were lost.

“There must have been something important there, which whoever has Billie doesn’t want us to find out.”

“Now what the hell do we do?”

“We need to keep looking. Billie’s smarter than the two of us put together. She knows that this is the only lead we have on Atlantis, so she wouldn’t risk losing us by leaving without some way of letting us follow.”

It was more than two hours before they found the next clue.

Sam stared at the ceiling. His neck was starting to ache from the hours of looking upwards. Inside an area of blank circles, a new text had been written. Instead of being chiseled into the ceiling like the others, it was written with a cheap fluorescent permanent marker.

It was written in the language of the Master Builders.

Dear Sam,

You will find answers at these coordinates. There is another temple of Atlantis.

I will try to stall them as long as I can.

At the end of the note, she had left a set of GPS coordinates.

“Okay, it’s time to go,” Sam said.

“Where?”

Sam put the coordinates into his computer and replied, “Siberia.”

“What’s in Siberia?”

“According to Billie, Atlantis.”

“It’s in Siberia. How did Billie work that out from the notes we found in the sunken pyramid in the Gulf of Mexico?”

“How the hell should I know? But she’s left the GPS coordinates, so we better head off so we can beat them to it.”

Sam turned to head for the entrance of the cavern, but something stopped him. He looked at the pile of orichalcum. A fortune left in the ancient library. It would be worthless in a few weeks if he couldn’t solve the puzzle.

Below them, the ground shook with the vibrations of a sound coming from outside.

“Can you hear that?” Sam asked.

“Sounds like the roar of thunder.”

Sam looked to the edge of the opening, where the Sherpas had started to scatter.

“Do you think it’s an avalanche?” Tom suggested.

Sam listened more intensely to the sound for a moment. “That’s crazy. It doesn’t sound anything like an avalanche. Those are clearly helicopter rotors. Given our high altitude, I’d say they come from a pair of B3 Eurocopters.”

“Which means someone’s followed us!”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Andrew Brandt watched the two Sherpas, the mountain goats of the Himalayas, scatter, leaving their equipment where they were on the mountain side.

"I don't see them," he said to the pilot.

"Keep looking. Those Sherpas weren't going for a climbing holiday on their own," Dmitri replied. "Those were the two I left looking after Sam Reilly. They must have entered the temple."

The two men scanned the mountain.

"There!" Dmitri said. "Look at that overhanging rock. It must have an opening – there are footprints in the snow leading into it."

"If they've gone in, they must come back out. Just hover here for a few minutes."

"I can't stay long at this altitude," Dmitri said.

"All right. We can't wait all day. Everyone off. We're going in to get them."

One by one, they dropped off the helicopter's skids while the pilot hovered, and onto the thick snow on the mountain three feet below them, followed by the soldiers in the second helicopter. He wanted to take no chances. He'd heard of Sam and his friend's reputation as excellent fighters. There was no way he wanted this to be a fair fight. And for that, he needed to outnumber them.

He looked at the leader of his commando team. "Aiden. Take three men and get me a reconnaissance of that entry. If you find resistance, take cover and hold your position."

"Understood."

The three-man team quietly entered the secret opening to the Atlantean temple.

Minutes later the opening turned to rubble along with the sound of a loud explosion. Andrew jammed his ice axe into the mountainside and took cover in the snow. Twenty feet away, the two helicopters, concerned about avalanches, quickly backed away from the face of the mountain.

Snow fell, but no avalanche followed.

Seconds later, Andrew heard the sound of machine gun fire. But he couldn't tell whether it was coming from his own commandos or someone else.

Aiden returned, blood dripping from the back of his head and

burns to his face.

“They fucking have the place booby-trapped!” Aiden swore.

“We need to storm that temple. What have we got when we enter?”

“You have a hole that is completely dark. A cavern that echoes, which suggests that it’s quite large. I didn’t see them, but they must have seen us, because they killed Frankie and Mitchell. Then the next thing I know they’re using an AK47 on me, probably stolen from my own men!”

“What do you need to extract them?”

“Alive?”

“Yes. At least one of them. Preferably Sam Reilly, but his friend must know something.”

“We’d need a miracle. We can do it, but it’s going to cost us in men.”

Andrew looked at his men, checking their weapons. “Okay, do it.”

One of his soldiers passed him a cell phone. He really hated the damn technology.

“Tell them I’m busy.”

“I think you’re gonna want to take this one boss. He says that he has Dr. Billie Swan.”

Andrew looked at his commando. The man was serious. Andrew reached out and snatched the cell phone.

“Andrew speaking.”

“Morning, boss.”

“I thought you were dead. Actually, when you lost the girl, and then stopped answering my calls, I kind of hoped you were dead, for your sake.”

“Let’s just say I’ve been busy. But all will be forgiven once you hear what I have for you.”

“What have you got for me?”

“Dr. Billie Swan. And half of the Code to Atlantis.”

“Christ. I thought she’d deciphered the damn thing. What the hell good is half of the code?”

“None, but she’s about to retrieve the second half. It was apparently broken up into two separate codes, and then stored in two Atlantean temples to protect it.”

“Do you know where the second one is?”

“Congo. Somewhere in the Heart of Darkness.”

Andrew signaled to one of his soldiers for a pen and paper. “Do you know where exactly?”

“No, but I’m still part of the team. I’ll let you know once they’ve found it.”

“Good. Let them solve the mysteries of the second Atlantean temple. Better they risk their lives than me. Once you have answers, send me your coordinates, and we’ll bring a retrieval team in to get the rest of the code.”

Andrew passed the cell phone back, a giant smile on his sinister face.

“What you smiling at?” Aiden said.

“Because we no longer have any reason to keep Sam Reilly and his companion alive.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sam quickly studied the back of the Atlantean temple.

All the tunnels seemed to have reached an end. And there was little that either of them could do to maintain their position against the significantly more powerful team of mercenaries after them.

Turning to examine the final cavern, Sam said, "We know Billie was here before us. There was no one else on the face of the mountain when we climbed it. We must have only just missed her?"

Tom pulled his Glock out and prepared to fire at anyone who came through the cavern. "Possibly, but sorry to say this pal, I don't think she's coming back to save our asses."

"No, it's not that. She must have been here in the last day or two. And yet, we didn't see her or whoever has her leave, which means..."

Tom smiled. Realization dawning on him. "The people outside aren't the ones who took her?"

"The thought's crossed my mind, but I don't think so. I think she beat us all to it, and that whoever's outside is also searching for Atlantis. And if they didn't find Billie, that means there's definitely another exit!"

"Of course!" Tom Said "When I read Plato's ancient Critias Dialogue, it noted that the Atlanteans built rings within rings of defensive structures so that retreat was possible. It was one of the reasons Billie believed that Amsterdam was related to the descendants of Atlantis. We know that's not true now, but one thing's for certain – if the survivors of Atlantis built this place, as an archive to their history, then they must have built in an escape tunnel."

Several shots raked the walls of the cavern behind them.

Sam looked up to see that the first soldiers were entering the far side of the cave. "That's great. But if you're right, we'd better find it soon, because whoever the hell's trying to come in here, they don't sound like they're friendly."

Sam started to quickly examine the walls, pressing rocks, pulling on things, and then he saw it. A slight change in the sand. "Look at that. It's as though someone has recently dragged something along the sand. Help me dig this up."

Tom dug his climbing pick into the sand and caught something solid. He struck it again, and again. On the third attempt, the head of his climbing pick caught. Using the back of the handle, he was able to

lever the entire rock structure out, and pull it to the side of the cavern.

Revealing a black abyss.

The air that now flowed upwards towards them was warm.

“What do you think?”

“It’s a priest hole.”

“What the hell’s a priest hole?”

“An escape route, built into the original design of the cave system.”

A small metallic device on tractor wheels slowly entered the room. Like a sinister robot, the machine drove toward them.

“What’s that?”

“Some sort of Remote Controlled Vehicle. They’re finding exactly where we’re hiding!”

Sam looked down the hole. It went straight down. A strong draft flowed from below when he opened it, suggesting that it opened to the outside world, somewhere.

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s just as likely to drop us off the cliff somewhere. Maybe an ancient privy?”

The distinct sound of several grenades being thrown into the cavern stopped their conversation.

“I’d say it’s our best chance,” Sam said.

And then dropped – into the darkness below.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Congo Rainforest – Two Weeks Remaining

The Andre Sephora was a 120-foot custom built Millennium Superyacht. Powered by three Vericor TF50 gas turbines, its triple Rolls-Royce Kamewa water jets allowed the luxurious vessel to cruise at sustained speeds of up to 60 knots along the Congo River. It wasn't the fastest superyacht in existence, but it was by far the quickest equipped with military grade armor plating and an automated defense system, operating four separate Gatling guns and one anti-aircraft rocket launcher.

The Congo River is the second largest river in the world after the Amazon. Inhabited by humans for more than fifty thousand years, the Congo Basin spans across six countries—Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. The Congo, a place renowned for its brutal and violent past – the days of the Arab slave and ivory trade, its long history of tribal warfare, and its present – the ethnic violence and massacres of today. The Congo has suffered horribly throughout its history, and due to generations of foreign exploitation, political instability, corruption and civil war, not to mention a prevalence of crocodiles, hippos, waterfalls and huge rapids, the river seems to have been given a wide berth by Westerners. Subsequently, few archeological expeditions have ever ventured deep into its rainforest.

The entire Congo basin is populated by Bantu peoples, divided into several hundred ethnic or tribal groups. Bantu expansion is estimated to have reached the Middle Congo by about 500 BC, and the Upper Congo by the beginning of the Common Era. Remnants of the aboriginal population displaced by the Bantu migration remain in the remote forest areas of the Congo basin. The oldest of all of these are the pygmies, the most ancient hunter gatherers of the Congo rainforest. No one knows for certain how many remain, as their ancient way of life allows them to survive in otherwise inaccessible areas of the remote jungle. This has permitted many of their tribes to live in secret, away from westernized ideologies.

It was the pygmies, the most ancient of these hunter gatherers, who most interested Dr. Billie Swan. Based on the markings on the roof of the Tibetan Atlantean temple, one such group of pygmies held the key to the remaining half of the code to Atlantis.

The Mankan pygmies were said to be the most ancient, ruthless, and powerful in all of Africa, having inhabited the region for more than fifty thousand years. If anyone witnessed the coming of the

people of Atlantis eleven thousand years ago, it would have been them.

Made inaccessible by thick rainforest and deep swamps, vast areas of the Congo remain unexplored, with some areas so remote that no maps exist. As a result, the area has been a breeding ground for myth and superstition, with local pygmy tribes telling of a mysterious tribe called the Mankan. Isolation from the outside world was so important to the Mankan people, that legend had it if anyone was caught finding them, they would be killed so as not to reveal their home.

The only problem being, with the exception of the notes within the Atlantean temple, there were no records of the tribe ever existing. Which meant, either they no longer survived, or lived in an area of the Congo Rainforest so remote and in such small numbers, that no Westerner had ever laid eyes on them.

Finding them was a long shot, but it was the only one that remained for Billie.

As the Andre Sephora passed through the mosaic of rivers, forests, savannas, swamps and flooded forests, Dr. Swan was amazed to discover just how vast the Congo Basin was. She'd read it described as the equivalent of navigating the Sahara Desert prior to GPS. As she passed the hundreds of islands, tributaries, and water based villages, she imagined it was easy to become disoriented and lost forever inside its labyrinth.

The river, along with the deep, thick vegetation of the jungle that lined the bank of the river, was teeming with life. The heavyset and somber eyes of gorillas often stared back at her when she stared at the jungle. Buffalo ran wild, and elephants carefully nestled on the banks of the river.

They were approaching the most remote section of the Congo Basin – the entrance to the Luvua River, and outlet of Lake Mweru. As they came around the latest bend in the river, Billie almost gasped when she saw the evidence of the river's greatest predator – man.

Peppered with waterfalls and rapids, the entrance to the upper river was guarded by abandoned T-62 tanks, littering the hillside by Pweto.

The Andre Sephora slowed to a near stop.

The Luvua landscape was unique. Golden colored grass covered the surrounding hills, dotted with occasional abandoned huts built from volcanic-like rock. Large trees seemed to be covered by giant sheets of white silk blowing in the wind – in fact they were

gargantuan house-sized spider webs.

Dr. Swan noticed the three dismembered heads on spikes that littered the bank of the river. They were approaching the most remote traversable section of the river and would soon have to leave the safety of the river and go on foot.

The skipper of the Andre Sephora, Jason Faulkner – a South African who'd made his fortune guiding the ultra-rich through unique African jungle hunting experiences – cautiously slowed the vessel, and moved it toward the southern river bank. There, he examined his most recent map. It was an aerial photograph taken that morning, depicting a section of the river where a route further upriver might just be possible. The river, he knew, was alive, and as such was constantly changing its shape. What was navigable today might not be tomorrow and vice versa.

Dr. Swan watched as the skipper approached a set of rapids. The difference in height of the river was no more than five feet, but it was enough to make it appear impassable to a vessel their size. With the bow of the Andre Sephora pointing directly upriver, she could see two sets of rapids. White and angry water flowed to the left and to the right. At the center, between the two, appeared one constant large rapid. The water was relatively clear, and she could see the bottom was no more than a few feet deep. Much less than the seven-foot draft of the Andre Sephora.

“Is this as far as we can go, Mr. Faulkner?” Edward asked.

Jason picked up the vessel's radio and spoke quickly in Swahili, the fast monotone language of the Bantu people, and then looked toward Edward. “I wouldn't worry sir. I have taken care of it.”

Edward stared at the violent opening in the river's entrance. Wedged between two islands, the water appeared angry as it competed to squeeze through the narrow entrance. “Really! You're planning on lightening the load, and reducing our draft?”

“No. I'm certain your entire inventory of cargo is important to you. I wouldn't dare consider forcing you, as a paying customer, to offload anything.”

“How the hell do you expect to pass that then?” Edward asked.

Jason grinned -- a smile that reeked of a lifetime of corruption. “I'm planning on raising the height of the river by another ten feet.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sam Reilly tried to lie back as best he could with his head just off the rock slide as he would if he were on a giant waterslide. At any moment he expected to collide with some type of obstruction in the tunnel. At the speeds he was traveling, it would be a fast death. He lost count of the number of turns the tunnel had sent him on, and then up ahead he saw the faintest glint of light. He slid around the next corner and at the end of it he saw the reflection of filtered light glistening through water.

Striking the water at such a speed, each drop of falling water felt like a needle striking his body, and then he felt the ground below him disappear.

Oh shit – I’ve just gone off a waterfall!

Sam forced his eyes to open and take in his position. He was free falling to the river, nearly forty feet below. Sam struck the water with his feet pointed down, in an attempt to break the surface tension.

Even so, it felt like striking concrete.

He disappeared deep under water.

Sam kicked hard with his legs to reach the surface in the white, frothy water. He’d done enough white water kayaking over the years to know that he’d landed on grade four or five rapids. His legs fought to keep his head above water, intermittently losing the battle as he dropped over another set of sharp river cataracts.

After the third one, the river settled in eddy. With the last strength in his reserves, Sam swam to the bank of the river and looked back toward the latest set of drop offs he’d just survived.

Just in time to catch Tom Bower scream, “Woohoo!” as he fell, too.

Sam watched as his friend casually swam toward him.

“You alive, Tom?”

“Yeah, I think so. Okay, so that’s gotta be included in the next ride at Disneyland!” Tom said.

“Sure – shall we include all the angry people with guns and grenades too?”

Tom looked around.

“I think we’ve lost them. If they do try and follow, I’m pretty certain they won’t be ready with their weapons.”

“Let’s not wait to find out.”

The river ran through a valley. Large trees lined the bank. Without any clue where they were, Sam knew instinctually they were at the start of a great river. But that didn't help him locate themselves, because rivers ran in all directions around Kanchenjunga.

"Do you have any idea where we are?"

"It looks like we've reached the bottom of the mountain. Only, I wouldn't have a clue which side we're now on. Kangchenjunga is limited in the west by the Tamur River, in the north by the Lhonak Chu and Jongsang La, and in the east by the Teesta River."

"The only question is, which one?"

"Yeah, we'd better find out so we can get ourselves extracted from here."

"And probably not be too vocal about it. Given our past number of friends in the area, I doubt there are too many people we can trust."

"That's great, but where shall we go from here?" Tom said. "We still have less than three weeks to rescue Billie and save the world."

A well-worn path ran above the river's waterline. "Shall we follow it?"

"It beats the hell out of taking our chances in those rapids without anything to help."

Three hours later, the two had descended to another clearing, where the water settled into a sandy bank. A white-water raft was tied up to a tree on the sandy bank. The name on the raft was Tamur River Adventures.

Several tourists were gearing up, ready to take the challenge of the river.

"I guess that answers the question of where we are."

"How about we take that?"

Sam looked at the tourists getting ready for their adventure.

"They're going to be pissed, but I'd say our need is greater."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Dr. Swan stood on the bridge of the sports yacht.

Ahead of her, she could clearly see that the river's cataracts looked navigable on an inflatable boat, such as a Zodiac, but would be impossible in such a large vessel as the Andre Sephora.

What kind of pirates am I involved with?

Edward Worthington and Billie shared a common goal out of necessity, but the man at the helm only served to remind her that she'd been kidnapped.

She said nothing.

Billie had chosen her course of action when she sent Sam Reilly to Siberia. She was on her own. Now she just had to trust that she had chosen the right villain.

In the distance, despite the clear blue sky, she heard the rumble of thunder. Jason noticed it, too. She studied his face. The man's face, which ordinarily displayed his overconfidence in all things, especially women, now looked suddenly serious and focused. His eyes were watching the river as though something dramatic was about to change. He started to speak a prayer in another language, most likely his native Afrikaans.

Jason tapped at his throttle. The strain of concentration became obvious on his face, as he was judging the right time to perform a task.

The volume of the sound increased abruptly.

Jason turned the boat to the left and pushed the throttle to full. Billie gripped the side of the railing to stop herself being thrown off under the pressure. Edward took another deep puff from his cigar, and stood confidently using only his sturdy feet to balance him with the agility of a much younger man.

"What the hell is that?" Billie asked.

Jason smiled at her. "That, my dear lady, is the river flooding."

"You blew up a dam?"

Jason laughed. "Nothing of the sort. I merely had a friend of mine open the emergency floodgates. It will close automatically in thirty minutes. By that time, the river will have risen enough to allow the Andre Sephora to reach the next level of the Congo."

"Holy shit! Won't that water hit us with the force of a tsunami?"

He brought the sports craft around in a giant arc until it faced

the rapids head on once more. His grin more demonic and tyrannical than before, Jason pushed the throttle to full speed. The bow of the yacht quickly raised above the water as it began to skim across the top of the water. “It certainly will. At full speed, barely anything other than our water jets touch the water. If I’m right, we should be able to skim over the top of it.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then, we’re all dead.”

Billie held on tighter, and reminded herself what was at stake. In front of them, a wall of rumbling water raced toward them. The rapids could no longer be distinguished from the rest of the turbid river.

“Hold on everyone.” Jason held his breath. “Here we go!”

Billie forced herself to meet the collision with her eyes open. If she was on a one-way ticket to meet her maker, she didn’t want to be the last to know.

And then the Andre Sephora struck the wall of water.

The collision sent them high into the air, the way a boat jump would have. Jason touched the helm just lightly enough to maintain a perfectly straight direction. The water jets propelled them just above the frothy water, as though they were flying.

Less than a minute later, the water settled and the sports craft became more controllable in the water. Jason exhaled and then took a long, slow, deep breath in.

“Well everyone, I think we made it.”

“You could have given us a little more of a heads up that you were about to try and kill us!” Billie shouted.

Jason smiled. “Yes, I could have. But would it have made a difference? We still need to get further up the river.”

Billie ignored him and walked to the deck of the bow.

Soon, she noticed that the river was no longer traveling fast, and then it slowed completely. *The emergency floodgates must have been closed again.* Their intrepid skipper slowed the boat down to a crawl. Without the gate open, the height of the river quickly diminished, and their risk of striking a sandbar increased.

Traveling slowly into the much narrower river, Billie noticed the dense forest now threatened to swallow the banks with them inside. The sunlight all but disappeared as the surrounding canopies of the massive trees dwarfed their vessel.

Approximately thirty miles up the ancient river, the Andre Sephora struck a sandbar and came to a slow, grating, halt.

“That’s the end of the line, folks.”

“Can you get us off again?” Billie heard the authority back in Edward’s voice.

“Don’t worry. I can get us off, but there’s no way we’re going any further up river.”

“Why’s that?”

Jason pointed up ahead. “Because someone up there sure doesn’t want any visitors.”

A hundred feet upriver Billie suddenly saw what Jason had seen. Three T 72 battle tanks were lined through the river, forming an artificial barrier to any ship. In the shallow water, only their turrets and canons were above water, like the malicious eyes of a crocodile, watching its prey. Each cannon aimed alarmingly downriver, toward them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The battle tanks looked like they'd seen better days, but their intention was no less significant. Someone had gone to great lengths to place them as a deterrent for unwanted visitors. More concerning yet were the three severed heads, which rested on spikes like flags at the back of each battle tank.

Their still fleshy faces, aghast in abject horror, portrayed a very recent incursion of the otherwise clear message.

Stay the fuck out!

"You look pensive, Dr. Swan?" It was Edward who spoke, as he lit an expensive cigar next to her. For a man in his eighties, he seemed keen to be constantly inclined to speed up the inevitable.

"Look at this place!" Billie said without removing her gaze from the wretches in front of her. "It looks exactly like something out of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*!"

Edward looked blank.

"You haven't read *The Heart of Darkness*?"

"No, but I watched the film *Apocalypse Now*."

"Look at those poor wretches." Billie pointed toward more heads on spikes outlining the water's edge. They appeared white. None of the local people would be stupid enough to enter the area. "Who do you think those people were?"

"I have no idea, but if we're lucky, we might just find the people who did it."

"The Makan pygmies were cannibals?"

"Some of my previous research has suggested so."

"You've been here before? I thought you only knew about the Atlantean Archives in Tibet?"

"Before I discovered the other temple, I asked myself the simple question, 'where could you hide the remnants of an ancient civilization for eleven thousand years?'" Edward took a satisfyingly deep puff of his cigar and then continued. "I came up with a list of several places, but the heart of the Congo River was certainly at the top of my list, due to its remoteness. Even if people could reach it, few would get through the plethora of terrorists, unstable governments, dictatorships, and children armed with AK47s to tell the tale."

"Did you know about the Makan people?"

"No, but I hypothesized that the pygmies, who were the native

inhabitants of the land for at least fifty thousand years, must have seen the Atlanteans if they built a second temple here eleven thousand years ago.”

“Why not examine what lies below the rainforest canopy using helicopters equipped with LIDAR?”

“I’ve already tried that. Here and in South America to be exact. We spent a fortune on aerial reconnaissance last time using LIDAR via low level flying aircraft. The remote sensing technology created a high resolution digital elevation model of the topography below the thick rainforest vegetation. Tens of thousands of hours of the reconnaissance. Found some interesting old ruins, wrecked planes decades old, and some ancient tribes who really didn’t want to be seen by white people from the outside world. But none of it ever revealed another temple of Atlantis.”

“So then, what are we doing here, Edward?”

“I’m counting on you changing my luck, but I’m beginning to have my doubts.”

“Why’s that?”

“Look around Dr. Swan. Do you real think that any of these people derive from the ancient Atlantean people?”

“I don’t know what I think. But whatever we’re after, it will have to be underground to remain hidden for so long. And that means we’re going to have to enter the dark forest.”

“You’re certain it’s here?”

“You were in Tibet. You saw the image I found. This was definitely the same point along the river. There were no other images. We now have to head north of the river. If there’s something there, we’ll find it. I just hope we find it before the pygmies find us,” Billie said.

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Edward replied, cheerfully.

“And if they do?”

Edward drew in the last of the cigar before throwing its remains in the water. “Then we see if my elite soldiers are worth anywhere near the million dollar a year retainer I’m paying them.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sam's father's Gulfstream stood waiting for them at Sikkim's Pakyong Airport, its pilots preparing a route to Siberia. Opening his laptop, which he'd left aboard when they first arrived in Nepal only a week earlier, he looked up the GPS coordinates Billie had left for them. It instantly came up with another reference. He opened up the document and stared at the name of the location.

Tunguska.

"That's not possible..."

"What?" Tom asked.

"The Tunguska event occurred in Siberia on the morning of 30 June 1908 at approximately 7:30 a.m. The explosion over the sparsely populated Eastern Siberian Taiga flattened 800 miles of forest and caused no known casualties. The cause of the explosion is generally thought to have been a meteor. It is classified as an impact event, even though no impact crater has been found; the meteor is thought to have burst in mid-air at an altitude of 3-5 miles rather than hit the surface of the Earth. Different studies have yielded varying estimates of the super bolide's size, on the order of 600 feet, on whether the meteor was a comet or a denser asteroid. It is considered the largest impact event on Earth in recorded history."

"And that's where Billie sent us?"

"Right."

"That's one hell of a coincidence isn't it?"

"Yeah, I'd say so – if I believed in them."

"What about Elise? Did she find anything in the Dark Net?"

"According to Elise the CIA went to great effort to cover up whatever it was the Russians found back in 1908. In fact, the CIA and the Russians signed an agreement to cover up whatever they found there. If you look closely at the images online, they don't match the ones taken in 1908. But the reason for the cover up was sealed – not to be released until..." Sam scrolled through Elise's secret files a little further, and then swore.

"Not to be released until when?"

Sam looked up at him, the slightest hint of fear in his eyes. "Not to be released until next month. Just under three weeks to be exact."

"Now, that is a coincidence, isn't it?" Tom said cheerfully.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Edward looked at Jason. “Are you coming with us, or staying on the boat?”

“Are you kidding me? There’s no amount you can pay me to enter that place. No thank you. I’ll stay aboard my fortress, and provide aerial firepower if you need it.”

“All right. We’ll see you in a few days.” Edward climbed on board the rubber Zodiac. He wore a bullet proof, and more importantly, spear-proof vest. With a handgun holstered to his side and a Mills 12-gauge shotgun in his arms, he looked back at Jason. His voice was slow, and brutally honest. “If you leave us here, I will personally drag you back here to let these local pygmies deal with you. Do you understand me?”

“I certainly do Mr. Worthington. You’ve paid very well for an exceptional experience. I can assure you that money was well spent, and I will remain to provide those services.”

“Good man.” Edward tapped one of the mercenaries on his shoulder. The man turned the throttle of the outboard and the Zodiac jumped into life, moving toward the bank of the river.

There was no bank to the river on which to drag the two rubber boats. Definitely no visible one anyway. Mark, who’d been his bodyguard for nearly ten years now, and now acting as the team’s official leader, made the decision to tie the boats to the branch of one of the million trees that blurred the line of the river’s bank.

It was difficult to even enter the jungle.

With no documented exploration by Westerners, there were no roads, paths, or maps to suggest what they should expect to find. No way to have known they had entered a giant swampland. A mesh of water and jungle – its vegetation was so dense that each of his team were soon forced to sling their M60 machine guns in exchange for a machete.

Their movement inside the jungle was slow. And no sooner had they entered it, than the thick jungle coverings seemed to swallow them, removing all view of the outside world from which they came. As though the jungle itself had a desire to keep them.

Edward could immediately see why this was one of the most unexplored regions on earth. The impenetrable rainforest canopy made satellite imaging useless, while the watery ground below rendered an armored vehicle useless.

His mind returned to the three ruined T72 Tanks blocking the river. *They must have been driven up the river when it was shallow.* If this place was still inhabited by the ancient pygmies, he could only imagine what they had done to the previous owners of those battle tanks.

Ahead of him, Dr. Swan jumped from one branch to another with the agility of a gymnast. She alone, he noticed, kept her finger confidently fixed next to the trigger of the M60.

He admired her fondly. She was beautiful in every sense of the word. By far the most intelligent person he'd ever met, and had an attractive smile with an exotic and sporty figure to match. Although he could hardly fail to recognize her physical attributes, he cared little for them. Instead he looked at her with the fond pleasure a father might his daughter.

Billie looked up, her intelligent, almond shaped eyes, actively avoiding his stare, before her smile broke the awkward tension. Edward smiled warmly in response, and wished he'd found her years earlier – before their time had nearly run out completely. That was, unless they found the temple, and the second half of the code to Atlantis.

“Are you still confident it's here, Dr. Swan?”

“You saw the image as well as I did. The river must have changed unrecognizably over the last 11,000 years, but there was no mistaking it – that was The Congo River. And it was about a thousand miles inland. Obviously the jungle has engulfed more of the river, and the river, in turn, has drowned some of the jungle, but I'm certain we're heading in the right direction.”

He smiled warmly. She was right – he knew it. He didn't even know how he knew it. But somehow Edward was certain.

Billie stopped and removed her pendant from her neck. It was made of orichalcum she'd found at Atlantis. When she entered the Atlantean Archive in Tibet, she discovered an interesting fact about orichalcum – the alloy was attracted to itself. Therefore, you could take a piece of orichalcum and place it in water, and like a compass, it would guide you to more orichalcum.

He watched her study her pendant again.

Its needle remained motionless. There was no sign they were on the right track at all.

She tapped it several times, but still the needle remained motionless.

“Any idea what the range of that thing is?”

“How the hell should I know? All I know is that the orichalcum has a high affinity with itself. It was strong enough that it got us this far, but now it doesn’t seem to be showing us much.” Frustrated, Billie replaced the device around her neck like a necklace, for safe keeping.

“Well, I believe you’re heading in the right direction. I don’t know why. I just feel it for some reason that I can’t explain.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Billie said, before jumping to another branch. “Now, it’s my turn to ask some questions.”

“Go ahead. What do you want to know?”

“If we find the symbols that we’re looking for – the code to Atlantis, do you have any idea what we’re going to do with them?”

“I have my ideas.”

“That’s it? We’ve traipsed right around the world to find them, and you’re telling me that you simply have an idea what to do with them once we get them to Atlantis!”

“Yep, that’s it. You’re a pretty bright young lady. If you happen to stumble upon a better idea, be sure to let me know. Until then, let’s first see if we can find them in time.”

“Agreed. Which brings me to the now...” Billie stopped walking, and looked at him.

“Yes?”

“How confident are you that you’ve brought enough people to ensure we don’t end up becoming a warning to others not to trespass? Because frankly, I’d rather not have my head on a spike.”

Edward smiled reassuringly. “These ten men are a team of highly paid mercenaries. Experts in their chosen profession. Strategically recruited from around the world to avoid any concerns about patriotism. I have NAVY Seals from the U.S., Commandos from Australia, SAS from Great Britain, and even a German GSG 9.” He was forced to put his shotgun on his shoulder while he tried to climb across the next swamp. Having made it, he grinned warmly and said, “So, you see Dr. Swan, we are very well equipped to deal with any natives who wish to interfere with our mission.”

“And what about the other person who wants what we know?”

“Andrew Brandt?”

“Yes.”

“Are you kidding me? The man’s a moron. He’ll still be following Sam Reilly to Siberia!”

“And if he already knows that the Russians destroyed everything

of value there back in 1908, and comes looking for us instead? Then what?"

"Then I see if the million dollars per head that I'm paying my men to look after us has been well spent."

He was surprised to see that Billie wasn't afraid. She was simply finding out more about the men he'd employed to look after them.

She stopped suddenly.

"What is it?"

"My orichalcum compass started to work again."

She took it off her neck and stood still as she could until the needle stopped again. Taking out his real compass, he noted that her device pointed to the west, on a bearing of 285 degrees.

"So, we're on the right track," Edward said. "Okay gentlemen. We have a compass bearing of 285 for our target. We're on a deadline here, so let's get a move on."

The small party of explorers continued on, into the jungle – the pygmies' jungle. The canopy became thicker if that was possible, and despite the time being 2 p.m. the light disappeared completely, so that each member of the team had to switch on their shoulder lights just to continue.

With the exception of Dr. Swan, all members of the team were grown men, not inclined to be afraid of the dark. And yet, even Edward, who at his age no longer feared death, felt it was a sign of the evil of the jungle itself.

He heard the splash first.

Followed by the loud German words, "Fick mich!"

Chapter Forty

It was the German member of their team and ex-GS9 Officer, who had fallen into the water below. Carrying his heavy equipment, the man sunk so that his head was below the water for a moment until he was able to pull himself back to the surface using a branch.

Mark was the first one to reach him. Immediately climbing down onto the branch directly above Zelig, he stretched his arm down and grabbed his fallen soldier.

“You okay?” Mark asked.

“Yeah, but I’ll be happier to be out of this damn swamp.”

“You and me both.”

Three other members of his team quickly attached a rope to Mark in case he fell in too. Zelig began pulling himself up.

It was the eyes of the creature that got Edward’s attention. They glowed almost golden in the darkness of the forest. Zelig, the poor man in the water, saw them too! And almost climbed out of the water on his own.

But he was too late.

The crocodile reached his leg.

It didn’t need anything else. Zelig was pulled deep under the water by the massive and ancient reptile. The soldier’s large figure looked more like a child compared to the monster that had dragged him under.

“Fucking shoot it!” Mark cried out.

Instantly, every member of the team out of the water aimed their weapons at the two creatures that were now too deep in the water for their weapons to be effective.

Zelig was obviously alive.

Several feet below the water, Edward could see the man using a knife to fight the animal, which thrashed and spun him like a ragdoll in a drier. The force was so great that Zelig lost his weapon.

Both man and beast seemed to keep thrashing. There was nothing any of them could do.

And then the thrashing stopped.

Zelig lay lifeless in the water. The crocodile let him go for a second and then snapped its huge teeth on the man’s head with a gut-wrenching crunch.

The monster moved toward the surface to eat its meal, unaware or indifferent to the fact it had an audience.

Edward had seen a lot of men die over the years, but this was the first time he'd personally witnessed one being eaten by a monster. It somehow made the reality of what they were doing stick home more significantly. As though until now, he'd been playing a game.

The sound of machine gun fire interrupted his thoughts.

He looked up. Mark had raked the crocodile with the entire contents of his magazine, and then attached a second, only to be stopped by another one of his men.

"It's dead mate!" The Australian commando said. "I'm really sorry."

Mark said nothing. Instead, he reached down and dragged the remains of Zelig toward him. By himself, he pulled the man's corpse up into the tree.

A second crocodile then made its attack.

Snatching Zelig's leg, it dragged the corpse into the swamp and disappeared for good. Edward had seen enough. "All right gentlemen. No one goes in the water. Let's keep going, and see if there is any solid ground in this damn jungle!"

Chapter Forty-One

Billie was surprised by her own strength. She had seen death before, but somehow the crocodile attack appeared more brutal. Like Edward, she knew there was a lot more at stake than one man's life. It forced her to increase her awareness of her surroundings and carry on.

Twenty minutes later, the arrow on her necklace began to move. At first she thought her movement was causing the arrow to spin. Then, when she stopped and took it off her neck so that she could look at it level, it pointed constantly in a westerly direction.

"We're getting close," she said.

Edward leaned in over her shoulder, so that she could feel his breath as he translated the direction to magnet west. "It didn't do that last time?"

"No, last time it was lot more sluggish. Maybe we're getting close?"

"But even when we were in the Tibetan temple, it didn't move like that?"

Billie thought about it for a minute.

"I wonder if it responds differently to the amount of orichalcum. You know, like a weak metal will barely interfere with a magnetic compass, whereas a large steel object like a boat will wreak havoc on it."

"So what you're saying is that we're either very close or that the Temple of Poseidon is covered with several million dollars' worth of orichalcum?"

"That's my guess."

At the front of their group, Mark called for both of them. "Mr. Worthington! Dr. Swan! You're gonna want to see this."

Billie was the fastest to respond, and Edward followed quickly behind her. The area had become dense with papyrus reeds as much as ten feet high. Their team were literally hacking a tunnel through the stuff.

The place was thick with spider webs the size of which could engulf a house. Billie shook her head. "Great. So we've left the Heart of Darkness in exchange for one of Tolkien's man-eating spider worlds."

Ben, the American SEAL, gently touched the massive web with his hand. It was thick, sticky and elastic. He failed to rip it with his

hand. Then, yanking his hand back he picked up his machete, undeterred and hacked at it. He stepped through the opening and became covered by literally hundreds of small spiders.

He swayed with his machete and hacked away, before pulling his machine gun out and firing a burst of rounds toward the bulk of them, sending them scattering.

Billie laughed. "Wow, Ben. I didn't know you were afraid of spiders. You know they're not dangerous, don't you?"

In the background, there was a constant hum, like the sound of a thousand beetles flapping their wings, or chewing on something clicking. "What the fuck is that?" Mark asked, irritated.

"I have no idea. But it's starting to grate on my nerves," Edward replied.

They reached another wall of ten-foot high papyrus reeds.

Mark pulled a large section of the papyrus to the side, revealing the most amazing sight he'd ever seen. He swore.

"What is it?" Billie was the first to ask.

"Unless I'm mistaken, I think we just found the second temple."

Chapter Forty-Two

Through the papyrus reeds, Billie stared into the opening. A series of circular dams withheld the ever-present water from the swamp. Each one cut deeper into the land, until the final one was more than fifty feet below the height of the crocodile filled water.

At the very center was a giant dome – which glowed orange and red.

Billie smiled. “That’s it! Poseidon’s temple!”

Edward patted her back. “I never doubted you for a minute.” With a warm smile, he said, “Come on, let’s go get the first half of the code to Atlantis.”

There was a strong sense of achievement and success that carried through their team. From Edward, as the financier, through to the mercenaries, all of them felt the joy of discovery. The soldiers quickly made their way down the circular dams until they reached the large dome at its bottom.

The thing glowed orange. “It’s called orichalcum,” Billie advised the men. “And it’s said to be more valuable than gold. If we survive this, you can imagine what sort of monetary share will be yours.”

It was surrounded by a moat.

In between each dam, a thin layer of water, nearly black, formed a natural moat. It was no more than seven feet wide, and the party easily crossed it using a carbon-fiber extendable ladder. Billie slowly walked around the dam until she circled it, without finding any entrance. Any inclination to wade into the murky water was immediately extinguished by the piercing golden eyes of the temple’s protectors – crocodiles, in the hundreds.

“More alligators!” Edward said, frustrated.

“Technically, those are crocodiles, not alligators. You see, the crocodiles have more of a V-shaped jaw, and tend to be more predatory...” Billie began to explain.

Mark interrupted her. “I don’t give a fuck. Just work out a way to get around them!”

She quickly circled the dome, only to be disappointed that there was no entrance.

No matter. It was only a question of time. There were answers inside that dome, and she intended to find them.

The annoying background hum of beetles increased in volume

until it sounded more like an earthquake.

Billie looked up. "That can't be good!"

Surrounding them from above were more than four hundred men no more than four feet tall and wearing nothing whatsoever. The white pygmies stared down at them, the butts of their spears thumping the ground in a continuous and haunting staccato.

Billie cursed.

They had walked straight into a trap.

Chapter Forty-Three

Siberia – One Week Remaining

Sam Reilly's Gulfstream landed on the Podkamennaya Tunguska Airport – Siberia. His pilot taxied to the outer edge of the southern arm of the airport. He looked out the side windscreen. All he could see was white.

"Welcome to Siberia," Tom said.

Sam sighed. "Yeah, not my first choice for a diving holiday. But let's see if we can make it a rewarding one."

A series of Russian police cars approached the plane from the runway.

"Look – they've come to welcome us," Tom said.

"Apparently so." Sam pressed an intercom direct to his pilots. "Have they told you what they want?"

"No, sir," the pilot replied. "They've just advised me to stop so they can board us. It might be a routine inspection of a private jet."

"I doubt it."

Two minutes later, a small complement of men in thick black coats climbed the steps to Sam's Gulfstream. He pressed the intercom to the pilot again. "Bring them into my office. If we're going to have a meeting like this, I want it to be on my terms."

"Understood, sir."

Sam sat down in his office and closed the door. His private Jet, a loan from his father that he really never intended to give up, was armed more like a Lockheed Martin/Boeing F22 Raptor. Although nowhere near as agile, it had a weapons system that would send shivers into the commanders of most Air Forces around the globe. On the inside, Sam had spent a fortune having the small office built to repel boarders. In fact, behind his office, a secret room held the ability to remotely pilot the jet in the event that his pilots were killed. Also, his office had its own air supply, so that he could vent toxic gas into the main cabin if he really wanted to protect himself from unwanted boarders.

He sat down comfortably in his office. His father worked closely with a number of oil and gas suppliers throughout Russia, and for the most part, he was treated nearly reverently when he arrived in the country. Still, Russia was well known for the pettiness of some of its officials, particularly in the outer areas.

And Tunguska was an outer area.

There was a knock at the door. Sam stared at the video screen where the feed from a secret camera displayed his unwanted guests. There were five in total. Underneath his desk, he kept his hand on a Glock with a silencer. He wasn't taking chances.

Then he saw her face.

If she was here, and had taken the risk of entering Russia through unofficial means, it meant they were all in much worse danger than he'd realized.

He opened the door and stood at attention.

She walked in and closed the door, leaving Tom to look after her bodyguards. Pulling the dark hood off her face, she revealed the most exquisite deep red hair. Her hazel eyes had a rich opaline ring to them. And years of hard work in a dangerous world had left her with a smile that bordered on a permanent scowl.

"Madam Secretary, are you on holiday too?"

The Defense secretary's scowl tightened, if that was even possible. "You know damn well what this about."

"The Tunguska event," Sam replied.

"Officially, we were never there, and I have no idea what happened in Tunguska. From what I've read, it was a dirty meteor, made up of predominantly gas and small fragments of stone, which allowed it to penetrate the world's atmosphere, whereby it then broke up about five miles above the Tunguska River. The powerful downward projection of air blew more than an estimated ten million pine trees to the ground."

Sam listened impatiently and then said, "And unofficially?"

"We sent a team of researchers to investigate something in that region. They never came back. So, we sent a team of soldiers in to find out what happened."

"And what had happened?"

"Nearly ten million pine trees were knocked to the ground."

"With all due respect Ma'am, a friend of mine is missing, and I'm pretty certain it's tied in with the Tunguska event."

"Really? So that's why I was sent halfway around the globe for you this time? You've lost that girlfriend of yours, Dr. Swan?"

"She's been kidnapped. And the only clue about where she's gone is her own note, leading with the GPS coordinates of Tunguska."

"Kidnapped, Mr. Reilly?" Her voice was patronizing in its

sympathy. “You let her get kidnapped? How very careless of you.”

“Yes, well it was a mistake letting her out of my sight. Especially after she told me what she knew.”

“And what does she know?”

“The location of Atlantis.”

She paused for a few seconds. Her normally abrupt nature softened.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes. If she knows the coordinates of Atlantis, then someone’s about to have a really bad day. Sam, you need to find her before she tells anyone else. It’s a matter of national security.”

“Oh no, you don’t get to send me on an assignment just because I’ve now found something to keep you interested. First, you have to give me something. Tell me, what do you really know about Tunguska, and what does it have to do with Atlantis?”

“I have no idea what it has to do with Atlantis, but I can tell you what I do know about Tunguska.”

“So tell me.” She didn’t have to ask for his secrecy. He’d pledged that with his life when he’d been recruited and joined her secret taskforce years ago.

“In 1906 a team of explorers attempted to cross the Canadian and Siberian Seas, and travel through to Moscow. On their way, they uncovered something.”

Sam would have liked to know what they’d uncovered, but if she didn’t tell him, he wasn’t going to ask.

“So, we sent a second team. This one was full of researchers. The Russians got wind of our operation and they wanted to be involved. When we no longer heard from the teams, Washington became concerned and sent a third team. This one was a mixture of scientists and soldiers. When they got there, they did something... and the effect of what they did resulted in what appeared to be the destruction of millions of pine trees, uprooted and lying on their sides. Local accounts talked of a strange blue light for about ten minutes emanating from the sky.”

“Okay, and what about the original discovery?”

“It was gone. All evidence of the structure had disappeared.”

The word ‘structure’ wasn’t lost on Sam. She was letting him know what was really there in 1906, before the Tunguska event.

“So, the Russian delegate and our own at the time, signed a

contract. Agreeing to never speak of it again, until it no longer mattered. So, all the documents about what happened were buried in a top secret archive, not to be opened for more than a hundred years.”

“It must be close to opening? It’s been more than a hundred years. You should have access to it?”

“Well Sam, that’s just it. The Tunguska File is set to be released in exactly two weeks from now. I don’t know what it was really about, but given the date, I would strongly advise you find Dr. Swan and Atlantis before that file becomes public knowledge.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Siberia occupies about 5.2 million square miles, corresponding roughly to 9 percent of Earth's dry land mass. It is bounded by the Ural Mountains in the west and by the Pacific Ocean in the east. To the south lies central Asia, Mongolia, and China, and to the north, the Arctic Ocean.

Lake Cheko is a small freshwater lake in Siberia, near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River, thought by many to have been formed by a meteor that caused the otherwise unexplained Tunguska event – but all attempts to examine the lake have failed to prove it had any connection to a meteor that fell in 1908.

Somewhere in the middle of this giant landmass of snow and ice, a Russian-built, gigantic all-terrain vehicle known as a "Kharkovchanka," and built to conquer the Arctic and the Antarctic Circle, rolled toward a new history. Its truly gargantuan scale did not prevent it from moving at 30 miles an hour, and climbing 40 degree inclines.

"Where the hell did you get this monster from?" Tom asked.

Sam considered how much he should say. Then, trying to keep it to the simple facts, said, "Genevieve once knew a guy in Russia. Let's just say their love parted, and he stayed there, while she joined our crew on board the Maria Helena. He owed her a favor, and she owes me several – so now we're even."

The massive snow machine drove onwards, while Sam tried to guide it toward the little dot on his GPS that represented Lake Cheko. Its massive tank tracks continued to turn effortlessly through the complete whiteout known as Siberia's winter landscape of snow tundra. It turned to the right, skipping the deepest section of a snow-buried river. Slowly, its tracks turned as they dropped toward the river's stony bed, and then up the 30-degree incline on the other side.

On the other side, Sam drove the snow machine through another series of ragged and struggling pine trees until he reached the crest of another hill. Through the opening of their heated windscreen a world made entirely of white came into view. Sam looked slightly perplexed. He tentatively scanned the GPS. They were close. And then he gently moved the throttle for the right tank tracks into forward.

The massive snow machine turned on its axis to the left, presenting him with another hill to climb. He put the engine into low gear and crept upwards at a 40-degree incline – nearing the maximum capabilities of the machine. As Sam reached the top of the hill, his

view of the sky ahead was replaced by his first vision of Lake Cheko. It was a small bowl-shaped lake, roughly 2500 feet long and 11,000 feet wide. As with the rest of the landscape, its surface was frozen solid. It would have been easy to drive across it, missing it entirely, although the Kharkovchanka's 38 tons would have most likely prevented them surviving the crossing. A dilapidated wire fence barred their way. Its purpose left no doubt with a sign that read, *Stay Out – Or You will be Shot on Sight*.

"The fence doesn't appear well maintained given the importance of this site."

"Perhaps it's no longer valuable?"

"And perhaps this is all a lie?"

"I'm sure it is. But whose lie?"

Sam left the question alone and continued to drive toward the lake's outer edge. Mindful that his Kharkovchanka would crash through the ice, he left himself ample distance as he parked.

"It doesn't look very big," Tom pointed out.

"No, I'd say it would be pretty hard to hide anything substantial inside that for a number of years."

"Like Atlantis?"

"Yeah, that seems impossible to me."

"So then, what are we doing here, Sam?"

Sam scanned the lake again and then with a confidence he didn't quite feel said, "Oh, something's here all right. Billie told us to come here for a reason. If Atlantis isn't hiding here, I bet you my dad's Gulfstream, there's a clue to Atlantis that Billie wants us to find."

"And the Russians haven't already found it?"

"No. Whatever it is, the Russians most certainly know about it."

"So, why not come out with it and tell the world?"

"I have no idea. But there's only one way to find out."

Chapter Forty-Five

Covered in Arctic Survival Suits, Sam and Tom stepped out their Kharkovchanka and climbed down the ladder on its side. Sam's boots sunk into the heavy snow. He then slowly made his way to the back of the massive all-terrain vehicle.

"Hey, the tourist information brochure says Lake Cheko is no more than fifty feet deep," Tom said.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "Really, is that what the guide book says? I guess we didn't have to haul these heavy ass diving suits here, after all."

Tom laughed as he unlatched the back cover and opened the roller door to the Kharkovchanka, revealing two enormous atmospheric diving suits, which more closely resembled space suits out of a 1960s science fiction movie.

The atmospheric diving suit, or ADS, is a one-person articulated submersible of anthropomorphic form which resembles a suit of armor, with elaborate pressure joints to allow freedom of movement while maintaining an internal pressure of one atmosphere. The ADS can be used for very deep dives of up to 2,300 feet for many hours, and eliminates the majority of physiological dangers associated with deep diving; the occupant need not decompress, there is no need for special gas mixtures, and there is no danger of decompression sickness or nitrogen narcosis.

The two ADS 2030 units sitting on the back of the snow machine were prototype diving suits, based on the ADS 2000, which the U.S. Navy built for submarine rescue. The ADS 2030 provided increased depth capability. Manufactured from forged T6061 aluminum alloy, they used an advanced articulating joint design based on the Newtsuit joints, and were capable of operating in up to 3,000 feet of seawater for a normal mission of up to 48 hours.

It had a self-contained, automatic life support system. It even provided the occupant with food, water and the ability to excrete bodily waste through a system comparable to that used by astronauts. Additionally, the integrated quad thruster system allowed the pilot to navigate easily underwater, while the hydraulic powered limbs allowed equal maneuverability and strength while out of the water.

Sam and Tom removed the two machines from the back of the snow machine and put together a winching system to run their safety lines, so that each of them could be returned to the surface. The device looked like a giant tripod with a large free-turning pulley

attached to its point with a large bolt, which allowed a safety line to be connected to the snow machine. The two men quickly put the system together and then attached themselves to a safety line, which in turn was attached to the automatic winch at the front of the snow machine. They then walked along the hardened ice surface of the lake. The three sharp bases of the tripod slid along the ice like skates.

Sam held out a GPS in his hand and watched as it picked up more than six satellites, providing it with the maximum accuracy. Satisfied that he was directly over the coordinates that Billie had left them Sam began to screw a round hook into the ice. "Okay, this is the spot."

Tom stepped forward and attached the second tether to the hook. Waiting for the automatic winch to take up some tension with the ice, he started his power saw. "Here goes."

In a slow and definitive motion Tom cut four lines in the foot-thick ice. Despite his cutting through it, the ice remained solid.

Sam looked at him. "You ready for me to start the winch?"

"Go for it."

Sam switched the remote control and the tether began to slowly furl. A moment later the ice pulled free, leaving an opening into the dark blue water eight feet by eight feet. The large square block stood on the water's edge and together, the two men were able to push it to the side, allowing a clear run for any cable from the opening.

Tom, focused on the plan, immediately began bolting the base of the tripod to the sheet of ice. He then tested it with the strength of his arms. Satisfied it would hold, the two returned to the snow machine to be suited up.

Thirty minutes later, each man was fully integrated within his ADS and ready to discover whatever was waiting for them in the depths of Lake Cheko.

"Tom, how do you read me?" Sam asked through the clear transmission of the advanced communications system.

"Loud and clear."

"Then let's go get whatever the hell it is Billie wants us to find so we can get out of these damn atmospheric suits. I feel like the Michelin Man!"

Chapter Forty-Six

Sam stepped forward with his large mechanical leg and into the hole they'd created in the ice. His ADS machine was set to positive buoyancy so that he floated more like a boat, with his spherical helmet remaining above the ice cold water.

Checking his internal instruments, he gave the 'all clear' signal to Tom. "Okay, I'm descending to ten feet to perform the first set of underwater safety checks."

"Understood, I'll follow when you confirm all systems functioning."

Sam decreased his buoyancy by letting more water into his internal chambers, the same way a conventional submarine manages buoyancy. Likewise, when he wanted to increase buoyancy, he would simply blow out the excess water.

His ADS machine quickly sank to ten feet, where he then balanced the system until he came to a neutral stop. Below the ice, the world turned blue. It was frightening in its rich beauty and lethal environment. Here, any malfunction in their equipment would result in their deaths. No one knew they were here, and even if they did, nothing could be done to rescue them if something went wrong.

Sam paused for a moment and let the thought run through his mind while he enjoyed the surreal view.

He adjusted his position mildly. With each movement, he checked the responsiveness of the individual articulations of his machine. It was relatively simple to use, and as with normal diving, only took a short while to get the hang of maintaining neutral buoyancy. Happy with the controls, he began running a systems check on everything else.

Depth: 10 feet.

Distance to the bottom: 45 feet.

Air supply: 48 hours remaining – although he knew this number would rapidly change depending on his depth.

Power: 6000 Amp Hours.

External temperature: 34 degrees Fahrenheit.

Internal temperature: 80 degrees Fahrenheit – Sam carefully adjusted the thermostat, reducing it to a more comfortable 74 degrees. Ice diving always tempted him to set it higher than he needed.

"Okay, all's good here. Are you ready to go find out what's so

important about this place?”

“Sure am. Here’s to beating Billie to Atlantis!”

Above him, Sam saw the still surface of the water below the ice sheets turn white with bubbles. The lake appeared upset by the disturbance, as though somehow its perfect, deathly peace, had been interrupted by the presence of a functioning machine.

Tom maintained his position on the surface for a few moments and then sunk to Sam’s depth. He then rotated his position so that he was almost lateral, looking back up at the frozen world above the ice. “That’s one hell of a view!”

“You can say that again, Tom.”

Sam continued to enjoy it, while Tom ran his system checks. A few minutes later he said, “I’m good. Shall we go find our answers?”

“Let’s. I don’t like the idea of becoming entombed below this ice if we spend too long down here. So let’s not dawdle too much.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Tom replied. “Preferably something warm and alcoholic.”

Sam laughed. “I’m sure we can find you just such a drink in Siberia.”

They slowly descended to 45 feet where the ground came up to meet them. Sam stopped five feet above the sediment. “Do you see anything?”

“Nothing more than the bottom of an ice cold lake,” Tom said stopping next to him. “It doesn’t make sense. How can they hide anything in 45 feet of water?”

“Maybe that fence did a really good job to keep people out?”

“Not for over a hundred years it didn’t. If Atlantis is here, then someone would have noticed by now. Heck, even our guys wouldn’t have been able to keep that one secret.”

Sam lowered his ADS machine to the ground. It seemed unsteady, almost wobbly. Tom followed. Both men tried to take sediment samples. It would have been strong enough to support a SCUBA diver, but the heavy ADS had more momentum. Something felt wrong. Sam decreased his buoyancy and the unstable ground began to feel more like a giant trampoline.

Beneath his helmet, Sam grinned. “It’s not possible.”

“What’s not possible?”

“I can’t believe they got away with it for so long!”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Sam put his ADS machine to maximum negative buoyancy and then jumped. The ground shook beneath him. Because of the years of sediment built up, it was hard to tell if it was in his mind or not, but then he realized with surprise that it moved. Not much, but it was enough to confirm his theory.

“What is it?” Tom asked.

“See for yourself. Reduce your buoyancy, and then try jumping, and you’ll see it!”

A few moments later, Tom jumped. Then he jumped again. By the third time, he stopped and looked at Sam. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. They covered the lake to create a false bottom?”

“It would appear so,” Sam replied. “The question is, to hide what?”

“Well, we’re not going to get any answers jumping on it. Let’s get rid of this sediment and work out how we’re going to cut whatever it is.”

“Good idea.”

Together they used a powerful suction device to clear a way through the sediment the way a dredging ship removes a sandbar or maintains the depth of a shipping lane. It took more than an hour, and seven feet of soil, before they reached it.

Sam examined the material at the bottom of the hole they’d just created. It was made of some sort of thick synthetic polyurethane material. The thing even looked like a giant tarpaulin or trampoline. Whatever it was, it definitely hadn’t formed naturally at the bottom of the lake.

“Any idea what that is, Tom?”

“No idea, but I have an idea that this rotary saw will fix it.”

Tom moved the extension arm forward into the hole until its rotating saw began to cut through the material. It was tougher than he expected, but once the saw picked up speed, it sliced it open. A moment later, a gap was created that was large enough for both of them to swim through. Large amounts of surrounding sediment fell through the new opening.

“Tom, I think we’re about to find some answers.”

“I just hope they were meant to be found.”

“I can’t answer that, but this is where Billie sent us.”

They sunk through the opening and found a dark world – untouched by humans for nearly a hundred years.

Sam's depth reading showed the true bottom of the lake as nearly 500 feet deep. "That's more like the sort of place I would say Atlantis may remain hidden for many, many years."

"500 feet is a little more serious. Even though the ADS machine is made for it, we're leaving very little room for error if something goes wrong."

The two men, feeling more like astronauts in their ADS machines, sunk into the hole of their creation, and into a new world. It was dark. A place that hadn't seen the light of day for many years. There was no marine life to be seen. Sam shined his powerful shoulder-mounted flashlight around the new ceiling. Although the material was certainly much stronger than a tarpaulin, from beneath there was little to differentiate the two.

Tom looked at the predicted maximum duration of his life support system. A simple number on the side of his mechanical left forearm.

It read: 47 hours and 5 minutes.

"So, now we're below a manmade fake lake bottom constructed of sediment and some sort of polyurethane, which in itself is below more than a foot of frozen ice... and we want to go down there?"

"It's either that, or you can explain to Billie why we didn't follow her direction to Atlantis and save her?"

Tom didn't reply.

"I think your girlfriend would be pissed off."

"Billie's not my girlfriend. But you're right, she'd be pissed – let's go find whatever the hell she sent us here to get and then get as far away as possible from this place."

Sam shifted his ADS into a controlled dive, and then asked, "Billie's not your girlfriend?"

"No."

Sam was going to say something and then thought better of it.

They descended another hundred feet, and the place had the dark appearance of another world. Yet, unlike many other places in which Sam had dived, this one seemed to be entirely lacking in any marine life.

At three hundred feet Tom said, "Billie's amazing. I'd marry her tomorrow if she'd let me. The trouble is, she has no interest in it. She's focused on something else, which she has no desire to tell me about.

But like the Master Builders and yourself, she can't truly commit to anything or anyone, until she finds the answer to whatever question seems to have eluded her since she was a child."

"I understand..." Sam began to respond, but stopped.

"Because you know how you get when you're studying a lead to the Master Builders?"

"No, because despite all those muscles, you're really quite an unattractive guy."

Despite their distance, Sam could hear the sound of Tom's deep laugh inside his ADS machine. Tom ignored Sam's joke, and then continued. "You know Billie a lot better than I do. Do you have any idea what she's looking for?"

"No idea," Sam lied. He would have told Tom the truth, but it wasn't his to tell. Besides, it was because of what Billie was searching for that their lives had become entangled. It had killed her grandfather. Her own father had the good sense to leave it alone, while she had become obsessed, and that obsession had very nearly got him killed alongside her. No, it had disappeared since they had last gotten close to finding it – retreating like a wounded snake, into an unobtainable region from whence it had come. Wherever it was, he hoped that it remained hidden, at least for the rest of their lifetimes.

"How about you and Aliana?" Tom asked, changing the subject.

"What about us?" Sam replied. His mind instantly returned to the girl's exquisite face. With her blond hair, and striking grey eyes, Aliana's beauty was surpassed only by her intense intelligence. He'd met her while searching for the Magdalena, an airship filled with rich Jewish families escaping during World War II that never reached its destination. Aliana's father had tried to kill him, but in the end had given his blessing.

"Are you going to marry her?"

Sam thought seriously about it for a moment. Did he love her? Yes, with all his heart. Would he marry her? Of course he would marry her, if their lives were different. If they had been normal people, who worked nine to five, enjoyed weekends off, and generally spent time together. But Aliana and he were both driven by something far more important than love.

He needed to find answers – who were the Master Builders really, and where had they gone? She needed to win a battle against some virus that hadn't yet evolved. They were different questions, but both of them needed the answers more than anything else in life. Yes, for the time being, they loved each other, and for every free moment

that he had, Sam wanted to spend it with Aliana. But he very much doubted they would be happy married.

“No, I don’t think we will.”

Yes, I know why Billie would never marry Tom, despite the obvious affection that she has for him – because I’m driven toward something that I can’t explain too.

Sam wanted to tell Tom that he should enjoy his time for what it was, but couldn’t come up with the right way to approach it. In the end, he did what he always did, and focused on the task at hand.

“We’re approaching 500 feet.”

“Copy that,” Tom replied. “So, I guess the tourist brochure forgot to move the decimal one place?”

“Guess so.”

Each man adjusted his ADS so they were now horizontally sinking, allowing for a clear view of the ground below them. It, too, was covered in sediment. But not enough to cover the markings of early man.

And then they saw it.

A series of rings, surrounding more rings, cut ever deeper into the earth’s crust, like a series of moats, culminating in a giant dome at the center. There was a slight ooze of sediment, most likely from a hundred years of settlement, which covered it. But even so, the glow was unmistakably dark orange. At this depth, it almost looked red.

“Tom, I think we just found Atlantis.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

Billie watched as the mercenaries responded immediately, with every bit of efficiency that one would expect from professional killers. They formed a defensive circle to the right hand side of the glowing temple, which had drawn the searchers toward their trap like flies.

Each person in their party used the Kevlar pack off his shoulder to build a mediocre defensive barrier. Billie had no doubt that each man was worth the price Edward had paid, in skill and efficiency. She looked at their M60 machine guns pointed up at their attackers. Even with superior weaponry and a lifetime worth of training, they would only be able to take out a few dozen pygmies each. But, even the most optimistic of equations showed they simply did not have enough bullets to win.

“Remain steady gentlemen,” Mark said. “Choose your targets, and keep your bursts of fire short.”

The men grunted in acknowledgement.

Their eyes were large with adrenaline, their weapons drawn and focused. Without exception, each one of them appeared to be grinning like a demon. Billie wondered how it could be that trained soldiers had failed to see what she knew to be fact – they did not have the ability to win this fight, despite superior weaponry.

A single pygmy – most likely the tribe’s warrior chief, screamed something in an unrecognizable language. Without ever having heard the sound before, Billie instantly knew what it meant. The continuous sound of thumping weapons ceased.

And then the onslaught of spears rained down upon them.

Billie, surrounded by the team, was the most protected, as she heard the continuous thump of spears striking their barrier of backpacks. Hope rose as each one snapped upon striking the Kevlar.

Before the next set was thrown, Mark yelled, “Fire!”

The sound of M60 machine guns being eagerly released by the mercenaries from their restraints echoed through the giant circles of dams, like an amphitheater, in short bursts. The first set of pygmies died instantly, their pale white flesh ripped apart as the large 7.62 caliber bullets traveled through unhindered.

Billie looked up and Mark winked at her. “I told you we’d be all right.”

“That’s not all of them,” Billie replied, as another hundred or more men took the place of their injured or killed tribal brothers.

Whosh!

A second set of spears were thrown at them. Again, each person grabbed a backpack to form a shield. This time one of the British SAS soldiers had the small head of a spear slide clear through his right hand.

“Fuck! Are you okay?” Billie asked.

The man smiled. “It’s all right. I’ve had worse nicks shaving. Doesn’t even hurt, actually.” He then gripped the trigger of his machine gun, and fired another burst toward the enemy. The first one was short, but the second one seemed to continue until he emptied the magazine.

“Stop firing!” Mark complained. “You’re wasting ammunition!”

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t know what’s happened. I can’t feel my hand. I can’t feel anything... in fact... I can’t...”

Billie looked at the soldier. “He’s stopped breathing!”

“Damn it! The arrows must be poison tipped!” Mark said.

“Is there anything we can do?” Edward asked.

“I’ve no fucking idea Mr. Worthington! Until today, no one even knew that the Makan tribe really existed, let alone what poison they use to arm their spearheads.”

Billie squatted down and felt for a pulse. “He’s got a pulse, but it looks like his muscles have all stopped working. That’s why his diaphragm has stopped. If we ventilate him, he should live.”

“That’s great, but in case you didn’t notice, we’re all a little busy right now,” Mark said, before letting off another burst of bullets.

Another hundred or more pygmies stood proudly above them in a sign of strength, despite the certainty they were going to be gunned down. But for every one that died, another took his place with the equanimity of a man who honestly believes he is going to a greater place.

Every time Billie snuck a peek above her it became ever clearer that their superior weaponry was no match for the pygmies’ sheer numbers and brutal dedication to the cause.

“Okay, don’t waste any more shots. We’re going to run out. Only target any who descend into the amphitheater,” Mark said.

“And if they all descend?” Edward asked, his right eyebrow turned upwards.

Mark gritted his teeth. “Then we’re all royally fucked.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

The pygmies watched in muted silence, and then they came – armed with machetes. Mark's face was aghast with the abhorrent realization that he'd greatly underestimated the force of his enemies, and was about to pay with his life.

At little over four feet tall, the machete-wielding pygmies wreaked terror as they approached like a stampede of wild animals. They jumped across each moat as they reached it. Those who didn't make it succumbed to the hungry instincts of the crocodiles, until enough men had fallen that even the beasts no longer felt interested in eating.

A gate opened at the other side of the moat and dozens of the angry tribesmen in dugout canoes paddled toward Billie.

There was nothing that any of them could do to stop the onslaught.

Mark, along with the other mercenaries, carefully targeted the heads of each pygmy, as they approached the final moat. Soon the ancient tribal warriors broke through, one at a time, killing the soldiers.

One after another, Edward's mercenaries were picked off.

The last surviving four people huddled together in the remaining corner. Hugo, the ex-Navy SEAL was grabbed by several pygmies, who eagerly ripped his arms off and threw him into the water. A moment later, a crocodile, sensing an easy prey, snapped its massive jaw over the poor man's head.

Billie accepted her fate to die.

In a strange act of fatalism, she stood up, realizing that her death here was meaningless compared to that which was coming to mankind if she failed. Around her, everyone had been killed, with the exception of Mark, and Edward.

And then the sound stopped.

In its absence, the entire amphitheater became ghostly quiet. Every single pygmy warrior had stopped, and each one stared at her.

A moment later, in unison, they all bowed their heads in reverence.

It was her necklace!

The orichalcum looked marvelous on its own, but outright dull compared to the massive dome of Poseidon. But maybe they had never

seen anyone else with the rich metal before. Either way, it was enough to stop them, for the moment at least.

Out of ammo, the remaining survivors were surrounded by twenty or more pygmies with arrows pointed directly at them. It was over -- they had lost, and Atlantis would continue until its prophecy ended in deadly consequence.

She forced her eyes to remain open. If she was going to die, the least she could ask for was to see it coming.

But the spear never fell on her.

No machetes lashed at her, severing her limbs and neck, as they had with the rest of her party.

Instead, each pygmy bowed in adoration. The sound of crashing thunder, which had only seconds earlier deafened the party as the entire tribe of warriors raced toward them, changed to a daunting silence.

It appeared they revered her as a God – their God.

Chapter Fifty

Billie tested her theory and attempted to walk through the pygmy warriors. Instantly, her hopes were dashed by several spear heads pointing at her throat, close enough that if she made another step forward they would pierce her.

She stopped and looked directly at her attackers. They were short. The tallest was less than four feet. Their skin was pale, but where some darker skin remained, the warriors had covered themselves with what appeared to be white clay. Otherwise, they were entirely naked. Their eyes were dark and their teeth glowed wickedly in the darkness.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

One man, his skin covered with thick white clay, approached. He was naked like the others, but this one wore a single ornament of orichalcum on his head. “Ah, so you are one of the great ones.” He looked at the other pygmies and speaking in his own language, caused them to return to their previous position of adoration and bowing.

Billie was unsure how she was supposed to answer the little man, whom she perceived to be the tribal leader. And then she noticed him staring in awe at her necklace – the glow of the orichalcum catching his attention.

“Yes,” she answered him, surprised. “You speak English?”

“Yes, I have learned your language. You are not the first one to have come here – trying to take it!” he accused her.

She smiled warmly at him. “We have come only to find answers. There is nothing that we seek to take. This is an expedition of knowledge, not destruction. That I can promise.”

Edward attempted to step forward, but a number of spears stopped him.

“That’s not entirely true. You have come to collect it, haven’t you? As was prophesied all those years ago. You have come to collect the code to Atlantis.”

She almost cried out in surprise.

How could this little pygmy know about the code to Atlantis?

Uncertain what he expected of her, Billie answered as best she could. “Yes, I have come to collect the code to Atlantis.”

The little pygmy bowed his head, holding it there for a full minute and then standing up at his proud four feet, with a grinning

white smile. "Then you should have it."

They're just going to give it to me? It all seemed too easy, after all they had been through. She noted that none of his warriors had lowered their spears, despite his friendliness.

"Thank you," Billie said, looking back to the dome of Poseidon.

The tribal leader smiled maliciously at her. "But first, you must prove that you are one of the ancient Gods."

Billie paused. Uncertain what path to take next, she replied, "Of course. How would you like me to prove it to you?"

"The temple was built by your people. Only if you truly are one of them would you be equally wise, strong, and brave enough to enter."

She took a deep breath in. "You want me to perform a challenge?"

"Of course. But for you, it is merely a formality. As a God, it is simple. Do you dispute that you are indeed an Atlantean God?"

Billie had no idea what she was going to do, but judging by the spears pointing right at her friends and her, there was no doubt about the alternative. "Yes, of course I know how to retrieve it. I will go in and retrieve the code to Atlantis, and then I will tell you what you will do for me. Do I have your word that your people will obey me once I return?"

"Of course. My name is Zanzibe, and I am the leader of the Makan tribe. We have lived here for thousands of years, only to serve you."

Billie looked at the other two men in her party. "Can I bring my companions?"

"You may take only one of them. Choose wisely, for once you're inside the temple, there is only one way out, and that is through the other side. We hope that you are the true chosen one, and that you don't fail where the many others have. Once you're inside, even if we wanted to, we cannot allow you to leave the way you entered. Do you understand?"

Billie nodded her head. She understood perfectly well. She was playing Russian roulette with her life, and with the lives of Mark and Edward. One of the two men left may have the ability to save all three of their lives. The only question was, which one? Edward was the only person on the planet who knew as much as she did about Atlantis. But then, Mark was a career soldier – a mercenary who had trained every day of his life. He would be by far a better choice for overcoming the strength obstacle.

“You will have three tests. One to prove your strength, another your wisdom, and finally that you are brave.”

She smiled honestly for the first time since meeting the pygmies – because she’d been to Atlantis, and had already overcome the all three tests.

Chapter Fifty-One

After careful consideration Billie made her choice.

The chief seemed pleased. "Very good Dr. Swan. So you've chosen the older man. I wonder how you plan to overcome the strength obstacle."

"We will see." Billie said, immediately wishing she had chosen the soldier. "And what about Mark. What happens to him?"

"Nothing. He will wait here, and he will be treated like the god that he is. But if you fail to exit the temple of Poseidon by nightfall, we will kill him."

She nodded her head.

Billie watched as the water that surrounded the dome of what she predicted to be Poseidon's Temple, like a moat, disappeared. One of the chief's men must have removed the plug. The entire swamp-like moat was gone in a matter of minutes, leaving several large crocodiles and one small door.

An army of pygmy men, eager to prove their worth, ran down the stairs and forced the ancient beasts into a corner. Billie and Edward slowly followed Zanzibe down the hundred plus stairs until they reached the door.

"Are you going to follow us inside?" she asked.

The chief spoke with sincerity but not unkindly. "No, we are but caretakers. It is forbidden for us to follow you. I do wish you good luck. I know that the time is coming near when the true Gods must return if any of us are going to survive. So I pray that it is you."

My God, he knows the truth!

Billie examined the door for a moment. It was made of papyrus reeds bound together, but had obviously been maintained or installed recently.

The chief walked down to that door, and in a mixture of wicked laughter and turmoil, he kindly offered the suggestion, "I would make a start. The sun sets in three hours! And the entire place becomes automatically flooded at sundown."

Billie shivered at the reminder. "Thanks for the advice. Tell your people that we will need to leave immediately after we have the code to Atlantis. We have a ship waiting for us on the edge of the Congo River. We need a path cleared so that we can reach it without any delay."

“If you live, you have my word it will be done.”

Billie attached the second lithium battery to her dwindling shoulder light and Edward did the same. Then she stepped into the tunnel – to begin her challenge.

She walked confidently into the tunnel, which was still wet from being drained only minutes earlier. She felt as though she’d just entered an underground pipeline, which wasn’t far from the truth. It was dark, but their shoulder-mounted LED flashlights lit up the place adequately.

Edward looked back up at the hundreds of white pygmies who guarded the entrance, as though he were judging if his chances would be better if he tried to escape now. One look, and he turned and ran to catch up with her.

“Sweet Jesus, Billie, didn’t you listen to the little pygmy?”

She turned and smiled at him. “Every word. We’ve got three hours. We probably shouldn’t waste too much time with chit-chat.”

The door behind them closed, leaving them silent in the dark. “The three challenges of the temple of Poseidon involve strength, intellect and an act of bravery. Now, I’m not doubting the thoughts of the blessed savior of Atlantis, but wouldn’t Mark have been the better choice for strength?”

“Relax, I’ve already been through these challenges.”

Edward’s face visibly relaxed. “You have? How?”

“When I entered Atlantis. It too had three challenges: strength, intellect, and bravery. I bested all three, and I’m betting my life that if this is an identical recreation of Atlantis, the challenges will be the same.’

“You better hope you’re right.”

The tunnel reached an opening. A quick scan of the room revealed it to be a large square, perhaps fifty or more feet wide. At the far end, the tunnel continued deeper into the temple. Only the tunnel didn’t continue forever. Instead, its ceiling, hinged on large hidden bolts, dipped in height in a gradual downward direction until it touched the floor. The roof space was covered in wooden spikes that gave Billie a clear indication of what the roof would do to a person who failed the challenge.

At the center of the room a steel bar hung from the ceiling above a stone chair and table in which a person could lock his legs. The mechanism had obviously been maintained and updated to more current materials, but there was no doubt in Billie’s mind – the purpose of this device was the same as in Atlantis.

Billie looked up and said, "The first room is the test of strength. See that steel bar?"

A large crease formed at the center of Edward's sweat-covered forehead. His evident fear of being drowned in the cavern had now been replaced by the more immediate likelihood of death by crushing spears. "I see it, Dr. Swan."

"It's basically a cantilever that runs through a series of mechanisms hidden in the ceiling in order to balance the weight of the hinged ceiling that's blocking our progress through to the next room."

"How do we do that?" Edward interrupted.

"At the other end of that tunnel a lever needs to be pulled from an upwards to a downward position and then held there, long enough for the pulleys to fully open a secret part of the wall, thus letting us through to the next level."

"And I take it the strongest person needs to pull down on the cantilever long enough to allow that person to reach the lever?"

"Yes, but it's not that simple. You see, for every ten seconds you hold the cantilever, the fulcrum moves an inch closer, thus increasing the strength required to lift the opposite ceiling."

"Okay, so we move quickly?"

"It's not about running to the other side of the tunnel. Once you're there it takes nearly two minutes to bring open the secret door."

Edward looked frustrated. "Dr. Swan! May I remind you that in less than three hours this entire place is going to be flooded again, and you and I are going to have a pretty shitty day, if we don't work this out! So, how about you just tell me what I have to do!"

"There's another lever. It's about halfway down the tunnel and almost undetectable unless you know where to look. If I turn that lever, every time you lift the cantilever in the main room, the fulcrum moves an inch away from you. By the time you've done that enough, the weight of the bar along with one of our backpacks should be enough to hold the ceiling upright."

"Okay, you know where the secret lever is, so I'll pull on the main cantilever," Edward said.

"Sounds like a plan."

Edward took grip of the steel bar and pulled using his body weight predominantly to lower his side of the cantilever. She watched him relax as the pulleys began moving and the ceiling started to lift. Slowly he lowered himself to the stone chair. "Go. I can hold this for a

while. You do what has to be done.”

“Okay, let me know if you can’t hold it anymore, because we both know what happens if you let go.”

“I know... I know... Just go!”

Billie didn’t wait any longer. Instead, she moved quickly along the tunnel until she reached the same place where she found the lever that moved the fulcrum in the same challenge in Atlantis.

Only it wasn’t there.

She went back and forth until she conceded it was missing. She shouted back, “How are you holding up there, Edward?”

“I’m up to the third increase in weight, but I think I can still hold it for a while longer.”

“Good, I just want to a look at something and then I’ll be back.” Billie didn’t wait for his response. Instead she ran to the very end of the tunnel and pulled on the lever – but nothing happened. She watched the wall for another thirty seconds, and then returned to the main room in case Edward should lose the ability to hold the bar.

The instant she was inside the room and clear of the ceiling covered in spikes Edward slowly released the bar, as a weightlifter would in an attempt to avoid jarring the equipment. A series of sounds rang through the walls and roof. It was like one of those old coin donation machines in which the donator received the pleasure of watching the coin roll down each section, triggering a reaction. In this case, those reactions were slight movements of the fulcrum and pulleys being returned to their resting state, with the hinged ceiling flat on the surface of the tunnel.

The tunnel they needed to pass.

She swore loudly.

“You okay Billie?”

“I’m all right, but I think we have a problem.”

“Don’t tell me. It’s not the same challenge?”

“It would appear not. It’s actually very similar to the one I overcame in Atlantis, but there’s no secret lever which changes the position of the fulcrum. It appears this really is a test of strength.”

“So you should have chosen Mark, not me!”

“Christ, I didn’t bloody know that they would change the challenge! I assumed when I heard the challenges involved a test of strength, intelligence, and braveness that they were identical!”

“But they weren’t!”

“No, and now we’re going to have to pay!”

“Now what?” Edward still looked to her for solutions.

“We try again. Only this time, we look at it as a simple test of strength. See how far we get. I’m quite small. Perhaps I can slide into the opening in the wall before the weight becomes too much for you?”

“Oh that’s great!” Edward complained. “Even if I’m successful and you do get through, then I remain trapped and likely to be killed?”

“No. The challenges were designed to be beaten by two people. Normally, once reaching the other side, there is a master lever. The purpose of this one is to set the entire system to neutral and allow the contestants to simply walk through.”

They tried again and failed once more. Then twice, but on the third attempt, Billie grinned at Edward.

“What is it?”

“What if we’re looking in all the wrong places?”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Billie laughed at its simplicity.

“It’s nothing more than deception and sleight of hand!”

Edward stared at her. As though certain she was insane. “I’m afraid those spikes are very sharp, and the roof remains too heavy for me to hold for any length of time.”

“That’s okay, because we don’t have to hold it very long at all.” She sat down on the stone, and casually reached up to take hold of the pulley. Gently taking it off its first hinge, she said, “Look what happens to the roof behind us.”

And there it was. While the lever was being pulled, the ceiling behind them lowered, leaving a section to climb out of. The most obvious of solutions, except painfully hidden to those who were focusing so much on the area in front because their lives depended on it.

Edward smiled. “You’re a genius Dr. Swan!”

“I was wrong, this was a test of strength of mind, not body.”

Edward then held the bar while Billie climbed through the exit and into the second room. There she quickly found the reset lever and the entire ceiling from the first challenge rose.

A moment later, Edward quickly emerged.

“Okay, so this must be the second challenge – the test of intellect.”

Billie stared at the room. It was a similar size with a large canyon in the middle. A gap of nearly ten feet blocked their progression. Below it, the stone floor appeared lethal at nearly thirty feet below. There was no way to climb down. A brass pedestal stood at the precipice to the chasm. At its base, a large pile of gold ingots were stacked half a foot high, their luster unaffected by the thousands of years they’d spent inside the ancient cavern.

Both of them resisted the inkling to take any – some riches are only valuable if you live long enough to spend them.

In the middle of the room, a single plaque made of orichalcum glowed red. Billie approached it quickly. The inscription was written in an Atlantean script, which was almost indistinguishable from that which the Master Builders used. It explained that to pass this challenge the contestant needed to calculate the weight of the tiny gold ingots to balance the exact weight of the bridge. Too much and the bridge would fall to the ground below. Not enough, and the bridge

would be pulled higher.

“This is almost identical to the one that I overcame in the other Atlantis. Only this one involves counting piles of gold instead of orichalcum.”

“Did you work out how much orichalcum was needed to open the drawbridge?”

“Yes, but it will be completely different using gold ingots!”

“Pity.” Edward walked to the edge of the chasm, and looked at its unforgiving and vacant expanse. “Where’s the bridge?”

“In Atlantis, the bridge was hidden, and swung toward the middle when I worked out the riddle.”

“Riddle? I haven’t seen anything to at least guide us with our task.”

Billie looked worried. “I’m not sure. Last time, it was left nearby the chasm.”

“Like that?” Edward suggested.

In the corner of the room a single set of brass scales stood lonely. At its base, another plaque was inscribed with the Atlantean ancient text.

Billie walked to it and began reading out loud...

“Place precisely 10 stadia on the pedestal. If you place more or less weight on the pedestal, the bridge will automatically collapse.”

“What the hell is a stadia?”

“Plato’s Critias Dialogue describes the length of Poseidon’s temple by the unit of measure of stadia. Of course, no one has ever been able to work out exactly how much length that was. Some have suggested it was equivalent to a Greek stadium, but I think that’s merely Plato playing on the superiority of Athens. Now, here it appears to be a measure of weight. Perhaps a length of it correlates to a certain weight. Either way, there’s no other explanation than it being a measurement of weight used by the people of Atlantis.”

Edward sighed. “I’ve studied in many fields through the course of my life, but math was never my strong point!”

“Come on Edward, we can beat this.” Billie continued to read the puzzle left by the Atlanteans. In front of her, a single balancing scale stood threateningly at the edge of the room. Four heavy iron weights stood at its base.

“Using only these four weights – 2, 6, 18, and 27 stadia respectively, the challenger must determine how many gold ingots to place on the

opposite side of the scales to achieve precisely 10 stadia.”

“Damn it! I said I didn’t like math!” Edward then studied it carefully.

Billie began scribbling the numbers and potential solutions on her tablet.

Edward was the first to see the answer. “I’ve got it!”

“What’s the answer?” Billie asked in surprise.

“It’s easy,” Edward said. “We need to place the 6-stadia weight and the 2-stadia weight on the opposite side to the 18-stadia weight and then add the gold ingots until the two sides balance. When the two groups weigh the same, then the weight of the gold ingots is equal to 10 stadia!”

Billie nodded her head.

The math appeared quite simple – too simple! She grabbed her tablet and quickly began searching for something. The slightest of crests formed on her forehead, the only sign of her stress. Quickly, she scrolled through and read the information she was after. Something was wrong, but she needed proof.

Edward started to optimistically load the scales until he balanced the same amount of gold ingots on the same side as the one with 8 stadia worth of weight. Once the scales were balanced, he took the gold ingots and said to Billie, “I guess that’s how much 10 stadia is. About twenty-five pounds!”

He was ready to place it inside the brass cup that formed the pedestal, when Billie stopped him.

“Wait!” she said.

“What is it?”

“I think we just got the entire equation wrong! I think we just overcomplicated a very simple math problem.”

“What do you mean? The math was simple. I’m sure we covered it in grade school or something. We placed the 18-stadia object on one side of the scales, followed by a 6-stadia and 2-stadia weight on the other side and then increased the weight with gold ingots until the scales balanced – leaving precisely 10 stadia worth of gold ingots! Now I’m going to take those 10 stadia worth of gold ingots and release our bridge.”

“That would be correct,” Billie said, with a tone of reassurance that clearly said that it wasn’t. “That is to say, if we were using the correct type of math, as we use today. But what if the Atlanteans used something different?”

“What do you mean? Math is the one universal constant, the language that defies borders!”

“The answers may be the same, but the method of reaching those answers vary greatly throughout history and society.”

“You’re losing me, Dr. Swan. In plain English, what have I missed?”

“We work on base ten! What’s to say that the people of Atlantis worked on the same system as we do?”

Edward looked hurt. “What’s to say that they didn’t?”

She shoved her tablet into his hands and said, “This!”

His eyes scrolled over the page, while his eyes stared in blank confusion. Math, she realized, really wasn’t his forte.

“According to this, the early inhabitants of the Congo Basin used duodecimal systems, as well as the most ancient tribal communities in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal.” Billie held her notepad in her hand and then looked up and said, “Who else do we know lived in both those places?”

“The survivors of Atlantis!”

“Exactly. Why else would they evolve to use such a unique base system?”

“Christ! The people of Atlantis worked in base twelve!”

Billie nodded her head. “Therefore, we need to calculate this using base twelve.”

“Base twelve?” Edward looked confused having just agreed with her argument. “Just because my grandfather stole most of the orichalcum left in Atlantis doesn’t mean I actually know much about the place. What do you mean by base twelve?”

Billie began explaining it to him in simple terms. “Mathematics is standard. The universal language. It doesn’t matter where you come from – math is math.”

“Right,” he agreed.

“Only that assumption’s wrong. We work on base ten. Most likely because that’s how many fingers we have. Meaning we count to ten, then hundreds, which are just tens of tens, followed by thousands which is tens of hundreds, and so on.”

“All right. Now I’m following you. I’m sure we learned about this stuff somewhere. The ancient Atlanteans didn’t use this method?”

“No. They worked out of base twelve. That means they counted to twelve and then moved to sets of twelve, followed by sets of sets of

twelve.”

“Okay, so now what have we got?” Edward said, frustrated.

“Using this unique system...” Billie thought about it and then scribbled on her tablet several times until she reached an answer. “The numbers 2, 6, 18, and 26 in the game now become – 2, 6, 20, and 30 in base 10. The number 18 actually means 12 plus 6, which we all know equals 20 in base 10. And the number, 26 actually means, 2 x 12 plus 6, which equals 30.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Edward said, although it didn’t. “So that being the case, we can work out how many gold ingots equal 20 stadia and then halve it to reach the goal of 10 stadia worth of gold?” Edward suggested.

“No, because we’re no longer looking for 10 stadia in weight.”

“But the puzzle said...”

“10 in base 12 is 12!”

Realization struck Edward!

“Which means the problem becomes very simple – we take 18 on one side and place the 2 and the 6 weight on the other to make 10, which is really 12 stadia!”

“Exactly!”

Billie and Edward carefully balanced the scale until they were confident they had reached 12 stadia of gold.

Edward looked at her and said, “You’re certain this will work, Dr. Swan?”

Beneath a smile filled with sweat, Billie replied, “Certain enough that I’m willing to bet my life on it!”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Edward, keen to discover the truth, then carefully placed the gold ingots on the pedestal.

Nothing happened.

Then the ground began to shake with the force of an earthquake. Above them, stone rubble fell from a ceiling that had lost its strength. The two quickly retreated toward the entrance of the room, which was covered by stone arches.

Chapter Fifty-Three

By the time the rubble had subsided, the chasm was replaced by a single bridge of fallen stone no more than a few feet wide, but easily able to be traversed. Billie looked at the almost perfectly formed passage.

“It looks stable enough. What do you think?” she asked.

“I still think you’re a genius, Dr. Swan!” He grabbed one of her hands and squeezed it with the warm affection of an old man. “Thank you.”

Carefully, they crossed the chasm and after crawling through a narrow tunnel, reached the third challenge. Again, it appeared to be a relatively large cavern, but this time the entire room was separated by 20 tall stones, which reached up toward them, like totem poles. From their height, Billie and Edward could step along most of them and reach the other side, but any misjudgment of their footing and they would fall to their deaths.

The steps ranged from one to three feet apart and at points were narrow enough that whoever was attempting to cross would have only enough room to place one foot on it. Even so, with only mild circumspection, even an 80-year-old man could make his way across to the level ground on the other side.

“Looks easy enough, doesn’t it?” Edward said. “This is the challenge of bravery. What’s to be afraid of? I’ve seen you hop from branch to branch above crocodile infested waters, my dear Dr. Swan, this must be simple by comparison?”

“Yes. Dangerously so.”

“What are you worried about? None of the other challenges have been that hard, once you take a step back and look at them.”

Billie looked carefully at the simple maze of totem poles they would have to navigate to across. “I don’t like it. Every other challenge has first appeared difficult, only to become simple. Now this one appears simple. There must be something wrong.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Edward said. “This time I’ll go first.”

She watched as Edward carefully took the lead and stepped from one precipice to the next with a certain level of agility that surprised her. His confidence rose the further into the maze he stretched. By the time he was halfway through, he was merely skipping from one stone to the next until he reached the fourteenth stone.

Then, as he landed on it, the stone sunk. Not by much, perhaps four or five inches at most. But then, so did the next one and the one after that until, the final few stone steps had lowered so much that it would be impossible to jump from the last one onto the level ground on the other side of the chasm.

He smiled, patiently. "Okay, I guess I see the problem."

"Yeah. All right, Edward. See if you can come back here and we'll see if there's another way through. Maybe there's a secret path or something that could let us through?"

"What did you find for this challenge in the original Atlantis?"

"An almost identical room. Filled with similar totem pole-like structures."

Edward jumped over the remaining stones and landed back on the same side of the chasm as Billie. Reassured to be back on the ground, he said, "And how did you beat it?"

"Funny you should mention that."

"Why's that?"

"Because when I beat this challenge last time I took a fairly lateral approach to the problem, which we might have trouble reproducing."

Edward curled his eyebrow. "Are you going to tell me what that is, or shall I keep trying alternative routes through the secret labyrinth?"

"I had dynamite with me. And I knocked over the final three totem poles, so that they lay diagonally along the final wall. Then I jumped from one to the other."

"You cheated?"

"No one said how we were supposed to get through the challenge. Only that failure would result in death."

"Christ! And you didn't think to mention this before you came in here – without any dynamite?"

"No. That's why I brought you along. I figured that maybe you and I would be better equipped, mentally, to solve the puzzle."

Edward laughed as he thought about it. All that rested on their ability to pass this simple puzzle. 20 stepping stones. Six that dropped lower and lower the closer you got to them. If they'd brought some sort of makeshift ladder it would have been easy. "Okay, so let's work the problem."

Billie drew a series of vertical and horizontal rows with her

finger in the sand to make a grid similar to what they were looking at. Then slowly filled in the squares with crosses for where the stone steps appeared.

From above, there was no obvious pattern.

Billie stared at it for a few minutes and then said, "Okay, there's only so many options. Let's try skipping every second step. Then every third step. We'll keep breaking it up until we come up with a solution."

"It seems like as good an idea as any."

"I'll go first."

Billie skipped every second stone until she reached the final 6 steps. The second she reached the sixth step, the remaining five dropped to where they had been when Edward had attempted to cross them. Like last time, they had become impossible to cross.

She quickly returned and repeated the process by choosing a new pathway. This time starting from the right hand side of the secret maze. Somehow, she was certain the perfect path was hidden in plain sight.

Billie tried another twenty-two pathways before she noticed it. To the right were another two stepping stones, which she'd dismissed out of hand originally because they took her further into the chasm, instead of across it.

"What about this?"

Edward look to where she was pointing.

"It's something we haven't tried yet. May as well give it a go."

She carefully made the larger jumps toward the two stones. Instantly, when she landed on the final stone, each of the six stones at the end raised in height until they were level with the opposite end of the chasm.

"That's it Dr. Swan! You've done it."

She turned to see the final six stones had somehow returned to their original height again. Billie focused on the next closest stone, preparing to jump.

Whoosh!

Billie heard the sound before she saw the giant axe swing toward her. A split second before it collided with her, she landed on the first stone.

Behind her the stone axe, nearly twice her size, continued to swing like a pendulum behind her and directly above the stone's she'd

just jumped off.

“That was close.” She smiled, her infectious confidence returning. “All right. I’d say it’s time to complete this challenge and find that code to Atlantis.”

Edward started stepping over the stones. “Sounds good to me.”

She reached the sixth stone, and carefully stood on it. This time, nothing moved. Then she stepped onto the fifth stone. And again, the remaining stones dropped – several feet this time.

Edward swore. “We were so close!”

They both looked back at the swinging pendulum. After she’d stepped on the fifth stone, the axe returned to its waiting position high above the furthest stone into the chasm.

“It appears, someone has to remain standing on the stone,” Billie said. “If someone could stay there for more than a couple seconds, it might just be long enough for the other person to cross the stepping stones and make it to the other side. Once there, the reset lever could be pulled, and whoever remains could make it through the chasm.”

“That’s fine, but you jumped with less than a second to spare. Whoever stands on that stepping stone long enough for the other person to make it across, would need to be more than just brave – they would need to be suicidal.”

Billie’s large brown eyes widened with understanding, but she said nothing.

“What now?”

“I was worried about this when I read the three challenges.”

Edward spoke them out loud. “Strength, Intellect and Bravery?”

“Yes, it was the word bravery that I was worried about.”

“Why?”

“Because in the ancient Atlantean text, the word ‘Bravery’ reads very similarly to another word – SACRIFICE.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

“All right. Then it’s decided. I’ll sacrifice myself.”

Billie stared at Edward’s face. He appeared certain and confident about his decision.

“What do you mean? No, you can’t do that!”

“Of course I can. I’m the natural choice.”

“What do you mean? We’re both entitled to the choice of living.”

“Are we really?” The crest of his eyebrow raised up in a sign that she’d learned meant that he was right and he was about to explain why to her. “The way I see it, if we don’t solve this soon, we’re both going to die, and that’s for certain. But already, we know that’s not going to happen. One of us can survive this challenge. The question is who that’s going to be.”

“We should draw straws or something! Christ, you can’t just accept you have to sacrifice your life!”

“But the challenge is called sacrifice. And here it is.” Edward took a step out on to the precipice and then onto the free standing stone which stood like a totem pole in the valley. “I’m old Billie. If I live another five years that would be more than I or any other man my age would have any right to. But you – you could live another sixty or seventy years!”

“But...”

He didn’t let her protest. “The decision’s been made now. You have to save yourself. Don’t look so mortified. I’m not simply doing it for you. We both know there’s a lot more at stake here than our lives. You need to get through this so you can deactivate the code to Atlantis. You’re the only one who’s been there in living history. Only you can save the rest of them!”

“But it will kill you!”

“Yes, but you will live. And that is all that matters.” He spoke the words calmly, and Billie realized that they were the truth – she was the only one who could reach Atlantis in time and change the outcome. But all the same, she found it difficult to accept.

“There must be another way?”

“Maybe there is. But we don’t have time to find it. We have less than an hour before this temple floods once more, and then Mark and everyone else are going to find themselves having a really bad day.”

She thought about it silently and then hugged him. “Thank you, Edward. If I do succeed, the entire world is going to know that it was because of your bravery and act of sacrifice.”

He hugged her back, and she felt the warm tears on the back of her neck.

“Go,” he told her, and turned to make his way to the SACRIFICE step.

“Good bye, Edward.”

Moments later she watched him, eager to do so before he had time to change his mind, simply step onto the final stone. She turned to see the last six stepping stones raise until they met the height of the levelled ground on the other side of the chasm.

Billie began running across them.

A split second later she heard the axe drop.

By the time she’d heard the third swing Billie was on the other side of the chasm. She immediately turned around, and looked back at Edward, who was standing there with tears of joy over his formidable smile.

“You survived!” she said.

The axe continued, like a pendulum.

“Another illusion.” The white of his teeth smiled back at her. “Wasn’t that lucky!”

“Wait there while I find the reset lever.”

Edward looked at the swinging axe. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Minutes later, after she’d reset the challenge so that the two of them could walk across without repeating it, Edward was across the chasm and holding her tight.

“I can’t believe you just did that. Edward, you literally just gave your life for me!” she said.

A wry smile came across his face. “I might have guessed that it was merely a test... I’m very glad I made the right choice!”

“How did you know?”

“How did I know what, Dr. Swan?”

“That the sacrifice was only in thought, not in practice?”

“What makes you say I did?”

She stared at him. Her brown eyes fixed on him, forcing him to be honest.

“I realized the pygmies must maintain this place. That being so,

it would make sense that they needed to be able to complete the challenges themselves. It simply didn't make sense that they would sacrifice one member of their maintenance crew every time they needed to reach the temple of Poseidon."

Chapter Fifty-Five

Billie walked into the final temple. A broad smile played across her face.

This room displayed none of the watermarks seen in the previous rooms, meaning that it had remained dry throughout the ages.

The room was said to be one stadia in length and half one wide. But what the Atlanteans called a stadia appeared much smaller in real life. In fact, it appeared no larger than a movie theatre. The interior was less grand than expected despite fundamentally matching the description that Plato gave in his Critias Dialogue. The roof was made of intermittent ivory as described in the two and a half thousand-year-old story, and the walls had silver, gold and orichalcum scattered. Poseidon himself stood as a statue standing on top of the chariot drawn by a six winged horse. Unlike the descriptions she had read, the God of the Sea had gold armor, but it certainly was not made of gold. Poseidon's height fell short of the ceiling by no more than a couple feet. Above his head, the ivory had turned brown.

"There's a fortune worth of precious stones covering this temple, but nothing like we were led to believe," Billie said. Her tone was almost disappointed.

Edward nearly read her mind. "But it seems an anticlimax of the vivid description by Plato."

"Precisely."

"I wouldn't fuss. What we are after is worth a lot more than ten times this amount of gold."

Billie smiled as she began to climb the back of the six winged golden horse. "Don't remind me. We're here to save the world."

Edward began reciting the navigational guide they found in the Tibetan Atlantis. "For the six winged beast that pulled Poseidon's chariot stared at something more valuable and dangerous still than the entire temple – the prefix to the code to Atlantis."

She scaled the gargantuan beast without a thought of the thirty feet in which it rose above the ground.

And then swore.

The kind of curse that echoed throughout the temple until it sunk heavily in Edward's heart, and he knew in an instant that all was lost.

"What is it?"

She quickly slid down the back of the horse.

“Someone’s beaten us to it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the entire piece of orichalcum in which it was supposed to be contained is completely missing. A blank hole in the ceiling is the only evidence that it once existed at all. Looks recent, too.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“There are drill marks in the ceiling. They look like someone’s used a power drill to quickly remove the orichalcum placard without any care for stealing the rest of the temple’s treasures. And that means to me that whoever did so knew the value of the code to Atlantis.”

“It also means that pygmy leader lied to us. Someone’s previously entered the temple and come out alive.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

Edward watched as Dr. Swan sat down in front of him. Despite her outwardly hard-ass appearance, he could tell she wanted to cry. The inner workings of her mind, unfamiliar with failure, continued to search for the next solution.

“If you don’t mind, Dr. Swan, I would like to find a way out of here. If we’ve failed, I for one would like to spend my remaining days on earth somewhere other than this godforsaken temple.”

“I agree, but I’m not convinced that this is the end. I refuse to believe we can’t find another solution.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but anything’s better than the alternative. Sam Reilly uses a computer whiz who can work miracles. Perhaps now that we have half of the code, she can break the first half of it. It’s unlikely, but I’ve never been very good at rolling over and dying.”

“Okay, so you’ll take your chances on the cryptanalysis, and computer geeks. What will you do with your remaining days?”

“I’m going back to Atlantis. If I can contact Sam and Tom, I’ll bring them too, and we’ll revisit the temple. See if there’s anything I missed.”

Edward smiled at her, like he would his own daughter, if only he looked at his own daughter like that. She had betrayed him. Of that, he was certain, but he didn’t know why – after all he’d done for her. He looked around the temple. “Now that we’ve reached this point, do you have any idea how the hell we are going to get out of here again?”

Billie reached for a lever behind Poseidon and pulled. “That’s simple. We reset the three challenges, like this.”

The door opened behind them, as well as a number of doors behind that, so that they could simply walk out through the same entrance they came in.

“Okay, let’s go,” Edward said.

They climbed through the tunnel, across the stepping stones, past the swinging pendulum, which should have killed Edward, had it not been for his sacrifice. Then across the deep chasm, where the bridge remained after they worked out the right number of stones to move. And then through the tunnel with the cantilevered roof. Following the entrance tunnel, the dim light of the outside world became visible once more.

Billie stepped into the dismal sunlight of the pygmy's jungle.

Mark picked her up in a joyous hug and said, "You did it Dr. Swan! By God, I thought for certain I was waiting for my death, and then the door popped open again." He then noticed her more despondent appearance. "What's wrong? Did you get it?"

"Someone beat us to it," Billie mumbled under her breath.

"It was all for nothing." For the first time, Billie heard Edward complain.

In the background the hundreds of pygmy warriors began to chant. Their weapons pounded the ground with a dire staccato. It could have been a warrior dance after victory, but as she studied them, Billie knew they were more sinister than that.

Mark looked at them, and said, "I guess we won't have to worry about the end of the world, or stopping the cataclysmic event at Atlantis."

"Why not?"

"Because, I think these pygmies are going to finish us now."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Through the forest of warrior pygmies came their leader, Zanzibe. He was smiling like a fiendish demon. It was impossible to tell whether or not this meant he was happy or angry. He approached with a knife in his hand. It was made of orichalcum and adorned with precious and semiprecious stones. Billie noticed that despite its ornamental appearance, the weapon still had a razor sharp edge.

Was that the weapon designed to kill his Gods?

It wouldn't have surprised Billie in the least if these violent pygmies actually slaughtered their own creators. They may have worshiped the ancient people of Atlantis for eleven thousand years, but they were slaves to no one.

She didn't bother to look for somewhere to run. They had passed the point of escape. Surrounded by hundreds of pygmy warriors, and deep in the jungle, their time had ended. Watching as the leader approached her, she noticed a heightened sensation in everything she did. Every precious breath of air she drew into her lungs, every smell, the constant drum of her own heartbeat in her chest, all made her feel alive.

"Zanzibe," Billie said his name as he approached.

"Dr. Swan." He grinned revealing a mouth full of white teeth, sharpened like fine spikes. "You are the first white people to have ever beaten the three challenges."

"That's great, but it was all for nothing."

"Why so sad? You have what you came for. You reached the inner sanctum of the temple. Have you not?"

"Yes, but it has been looted and stripped until all written markings were entirely removed. There is nothing of any intellectual value for us there."

"Yes. Before I became king some white men came with guns. They forced their way into the temple, and stripped it of everything."

"The Nazis reached it!" Billie said.

"That's the first I've heard about them getting this far," Edward said.

"All this time, and Hitler's little vermin still have the ability to kill millions of lives."

The little pygmy bowed his head. "I'm sorry that you have traveled so far only to discover that what you searched for had been

stolen years ago. Can I ask precisely what you seek?"

"How much do you know about the people who built this shrine?"

"You mean our Gods?"

"Yes."

"They came from a land across the sea and were the most powerful of all, until the heavens became jealous and struck them from above with a million individual fires, until their land sank once more into the sea."

"That's about as much as we know about your Gods," Billie confirmed. "In their first home, a machine survived the disaster, which has the power to create much good or death in the world. Legend has it that there is a code to activate the machine. It was so valuable, that the code was broken into two and then a shrine in two separate parts of the world stored one half each. We have already found one of the halves in mountains far away from here. The other half, we were hoping to find here."

"Yes, I know about the code to Atlantis. People, before you have come in search of it. I wish I could help you. Maybe if I had something similar to see, then I could help. Perhaps I've seen it before."

She looked at him, doubtful, and then handed her tablet over with the image of the second half of the code to Atlantis. The pygmy took it, and Billie asked, "Ever seen anything like this?"

The pygmy grinned. "As a matter of fact, Dr. Swan, I have."

"Really, where?"

"Until recently, it was in the temple, just here."

Her heart sank.

So it was destroyed then, and with it, all hope.

"There is nothing more we can do."

"That's not true."

"Why? What else do you have in mind?"

"Because, my people built this temple thousands of years ago, as a tribute to the real Gods. They adorned the walls with gold – the closest metal to that which the God's covered their own temple, which glowed red."

"Your people built this temple?" Billie asked, in surprise.

The pygmy nodded his head.

"It's not the original temple of Poseidon? It was a replica?"

Edward said.

“Yes,” the pygmy replied.

Billie looked around. “But where’s the original?”

“The original was found by my great ancestors thousands upon thousands of years ago. But I’m afraid that when the Congo River swelled, our God’s shrine was flooded. For years, our men would swim into it and study it, so that we could recreate it exactly in their image. As the millennia went by, the mighty Congo grew, and soon only the strongest of swimmers could reach it. Now, it would be impossible to swim to such a depth.”

He grinned again. “But on your boat, Dr. Swan, I’m sure you would have the means to reach it!”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Andrew opened the second meeting of the Phoenix Resistance via video conference. Without wasting time with any of the formalities, or arcane rituals, Andrew began his rundown of their situation.

“So far we have followed Mr. Reilly and his companion to an Atlantean Temple, in the high altitude mountain of Kanchenjunga, which rests partly between Tibet, Nepal, and Sikkim. The place appears to be an 11,000-year-old cavern that stores the archives of the entire history of the people of Atlantis. I have been told that despite it being built after the destruction of Atlantis, it spans nearly a hundred thousand years’ worth of their documented history.”

It was news to some of the men within the society – but to others, he had said nothing they didn’t already know.

Andrew continued. “We have reason to believe the temple has recently been examined by Dr. Swan, and in doing so, she has found the location of the second temple. Our team are currently on Mount Kanchenjunga attempting to solve its numerous markings and notations. And work out where her team has gone.”

He intentionally lied, knowing that one man amongst them was a traitor.

Armel brazenly interrupted. “And what of Mr. Reilly and his companion?”

“Both men have been eliminated,” Andrew replied confidently. “Gentlemen, soon we must prepare for what is to come. In less than two weeks, the world will be a very different place!”

There was a strong cheer amongst the members of the Phoenix Resistance.

Kazimir, the Russian, hushed them all. “I am afraid to inform you, Master. Sam Reilly and Tom Bower were not killed as you were led to believe.”

“That’s impossible, I saw them killed with my own eyes. Multiple hand grenades exploded right next to them!” Andrew did not believe what the Russian was telling him.

“Then your own eyes deceived you.”

“What do you know?”

“Two days ago, I received word from an agency of mine – Sam Reilly’s Gulfstream arrived in Tunguska.”

Andrew swore. “But who got out?”

“Master, I have photographs of Sam Reilly and Tom Bower. They had borrowed a Kharkovchanka from a local, and loaded it with Atmospheric Diving Suits – which means...”

“I know what it bloody well means!” Andrew swore again. “I thought you said your grandfather took care of the problem in 1908 when he and Teddy Roosevelt came to the agreement that all information concerning Atlantis must be destroyed, or at least locked away in a time capsule until it could no longer cause harm!”

Kazimir put his hands up in a pacifying gesture. “I assure you, we have taken steps to stop would-be explorers from stumbling upon the truth. Sam Reilly will find nothing of use to him. And as for the American time capsule, it can’t be opened until the end of the month – when it no longer has the ability to do any harm to our operation.”

“Yeah – then why the hell did two people in Nepal feel the need, after nearly being killed by my men, to go directly to Siberia with fucking Atmospheric Diving Suits?”

“I have no idea, sir. But I can assure you, I have already arranged for the systems in place to ensure they don’t reach it.”

“You better hope they work better than your grandfather’s pact to keep it secret. Otherwise we’re all going to have a lot more to deal with than we bargained for!”

Andrew then canceled their connection.

It was time for him to take Dr. Swan and visit Atlantis with the code.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Sam and Tom made two reconnaissance circuits of the area from above. Sam imagined that this place eleven thousand years ago might have been above ground. The rings would have served as massive moats, designed to keep enemies out, each one more protected than the preceding one. Then, in the southern end of the inner-most indentation, Tom spotted an opening in the rock wall, inside the moat. Next to it was a large rectangular stone, broken in two, and roughly matching the dimensions of the opening.

“Shall we?” Sam asked, looking at the opening and hoping his ADS machine would fit inside.

“After you. I’ll fix a bolt into the wall here so we have something else to use to pull ourselves out with if we become stuck.”

Sam waited while Tom inserted the bolt into the wall and then connected his safety tether to it. He then shined his flashlight into the tunnel. The light dimmed in the distance, and he couldn’t quite tell if the tunnel changed direction, or the light simply couldn’t penetrate its depth. The tunnel was quite large. Nearly ten feet in height and another five wide. Plenty of room for his ADS machine, but not as much as he’d like. In his left hand, inside the suit, Sam adjusted the angle so that he entered the room horizontally, instead of vertically. This provided him with more maneuverability, if more obstacles stood in their way.

“You with me, Tom?” he asked as he reached fifty feet inside the tunnel.

“I’m right behind you.”

At a hundred and twenty feet the tunnel opened into a large room. A quick scan revealed it to be a large square approximately forty feet wide. At the far end the tunnel continued deeper into the temple. Only the tunnel didn’t continue forever. Instead, its ceiling, presumably hinged on large hidden bolts, dipped in height in a gradual downward direction until it touched the floor. The roof space was covered in wooden spikes that gave Sam a clear indication of what the roof would do to a person who failed the challenge. At the center of the room a steel bar hung from the ceiling above a stone chair and table in which a person could lock their legs. The mechanism had most likely failed, but there was no doubt in his mind what it was once used for. The only question was, could they progress through the temple, if the mechanisms had failed?

Above the chair some text could be seen on the stone roof in

large, bold, lettering, the same used by the Master Builders. Sam moved closer to the inscription and examined it. The individual lettering had been damaged but enough were intact that he could make out the words.

Sam read each one slowly and out loud, “Strength, intelligence, sacrifice, and wealth”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Tom said.

“No, I can’t say it does. By the looks of things, the ancient people of Atlantis went to some extreme lengths to ensure that only the worthy reached their temple. I couldn’t imagine any of the mechanisms are still working after all these years.”

“Even so, I’d like to understand how each of these rooms operated before we get ourselves killed by an eleven thousand year-old booby-trap.”

“Only in Indiana Jones stories are these things still active,” Sam said, with a confidence he didn’t entirely feel.

Moving toward the end of the downward sloping tunnel with the remains of spikes on the room, Sam found something to reassure himself. At the end of the tunnel the roof had been pried open with a pair of hydraulic struts. “There, this room must have once been the test of strength. Somehow, you needed to lift the roof or something. Of course, whoever did reach this place in 1908 weren’t playing by the Atlantean’s rules.”

Entering the second room, Sam was greeted by a massive room with a chasm in the middle nearly twenty feet wide. The remains of a bridge could be seen at the bottom – not that it would be required now that the entire room had been flooded. Next to it, a golden pair of scales stood, as though they were forever waiting for someone to balance them. On the wall, where they approached was the word, INTELLECT. Across the chasm, a steel ladder had been strung. At its base, the small emblem of an American Flag shined bright.

“Okay, so I guess we did make it here in 1908. The question is, where was here?” Tom said. Then, to clarify he said, “If it wasn’t at the bottom of a five-hundred-foot lake, where was it?”

Sam studied the ladder. Clearly whoever had used it weren’t swimming at the time. “I have no idea.”

The two men carefully powered their ADS machine toward the end of the room, along another tunnel and finally into the third room. This one had the word SACRIFICE at its entrance. It was relatively small compared to the other rooms. Five pillars stood approximately forty feet above another chasm’s floor. To the side of the middle pillar,

about three feet away, stood a single totem pole. Above it, an enormous axe remained attached to the ceiling more than ten feet above, forming a perfect pendulum of death.

“Now I’m really feeling like I’m in one of Indy’s nightmares,” Tom said.

Sam laughed. “No Tom, I think Indy would have felt safer inside an ADS machine. Come on, let’s go find the reward.”

The electric propulsion units whirled into life as they crossed the seemingly easy test of SACRIFICE.

“What do you think was meant to happen here?” Tom asked.

“Nothing good, whatever it was. I suppose being a sacrifice, someone had to stand on that additional pillar, in order to trigger a weighted mechanism to open the final door so the other person could exit. The only problem being, he or she would die in the process.”

At the end of the room the door had been held open once more by a hydraulic strut. Sam continued through the tunnel, which gradually moved in an upwards direction, and toward the fourth room.

When he reached the end of the tunnel the head of Sam’s ADS machine left the buoyancy of water. Startled, Sam said, “Tom, you’re not going to believe this – it appears the fourth room is still dry.”

Chapter Sixty

Sam stepped out of the water and into a massive room. The hum of his ADS machine's electric propulsion system was replaced by the hydraulic movements of his mechanical limbs. He scanned the cavern they'd entered. There was no question about it -- they were standing inside Poseidon's temple.

In Plato's Critias Dialogue, Poseidon's Temple was described as a stadia's length by half a stadia's width. No one had ever worked out what an Atlantean Stadia represented as a measurement. Looking around, Sam was surprised to discover that although it was large, it wasn't anywhere near as large as historians had guessed over the years.

The ancient cavern was nearly barren.

Inside the temple of Poseidon, the place was completely dry. It looked like one of those fake sets after Hollywood got to it in another movie about destruction of the world. Sam looked around and could imagine it to be Atlantis, as described by Plato, with the one exception -- all the wealth had been stolen. The gold statue of Poseidon himself was missing, the walls were no longer covered in orichalcum -- the precious alloy mined only in Atlantis. The roof, stripped of its ancient ivory and precious gemstones, was barren blocks of stone.

"This looks like Atlantis all right," Sam said.

"Yeah, the only problem is we got here about a hundred years too late!" Tom replied. "Man, look at this place. Whoever got here first, either the Russians or our guys, certainly did a job on the place. Archeologists would have a seizure if they saw the destruction here."

At the center a round ball glowed with a slightly bluish tinge. It was as tall as each of them, were they not wearing an ADS machine. Despite its obvious glow, Sam had nearly missed it during his first reconnaissance of the room, the shock at the wanton destruction of Atlantis -- most likely for its precious metals and ivory -- distorting his vision. But now, the spherical structure seemed obvious.

"I've seen that blue glow somewhere before," Sam said.

Tom squinted. "So have I."

"Where?"

"At the center of the Mayan Pyramid. The same place Billie found the map to Atlantis."

"Of course! I remember the bluish glow now. And I remember her showing me the sphere, too. Only hers was only the size of a

clenched fist. Billie said she'd taken it to a number of geologists who could only tell her that it appeared natural and similar to a diamond, only stronger, brighter, and it had the unique properties of transmitting sound and light better than any other material ever known."

Sam walked up to the sphere and examined it. More than fifty strange markings could be seen on the outside of it. Only, they weren't completely strange markings. He'd seen them before, too. But where, he couldn't even imagine.

"Help me roll this ball will you?" Sam asked.

"Sure, anywhere you're planning on taking it?" Tom replied.

"No, just off this light so I can see what's under it."

Together they attempted to move the sphere. Despite the massive lifting power of the ADS's hydraulic arms, the sphere didn't move.

"This stuff's heavy," Tom said.

"Let's see if we can rotate it on its axis," Sam said.

Carefully gripping the sphere with his metal hands, Sam prepared to rotate their strange discovery. This time, it moved easily, as though it had been floating on water or resting in a pile of tiny ball bearings.

"Any idea what the hell any of this means?" Sam asked.

"Not a clue. The sphere that Billie and I found in the Mayan pyramid, buried in the seabed, showed a number of unique locations. Maybe it will show us something. Billie knew about it, so there must be something she wants us to see."

Sam moved it again. This time he noticed that the marking on the sphere, when it reached the blue glow at the base, turned to a glowing red. He turned the sphere again, and the same small marking remained bright red, as though it was glowing with fire.

Continuing the process, another four marks became engulfed in a flame red glow, while more than forty others which he'd tried remained unchanged.

"Okay Sam, I'm here to find Billie, but you're the expert in ancient mythology – what the hell is this?"

"If I had a guess, I'd say that it's some sort of ancient counting device, like a computer."

"The Atlanteans had computers eleven thousand years ago?"

"Not quite, but I'd say this is a pretty complex abacus. The more

I look at it, the more I can't help but feel like I'm triggering a code to something, but what I don't know."

"You mean, the code to Atlantis?" Tom said.

"Yeah, something like that. Where did you get that idea from?"

"Because, when Billie called me a few weeks ago, she told me that she'd reached it, but now had to find the code to Atlantis, before it was too late!"

A cold shiver ran down Sam's spine. A sixth sense that he was close to achieving something or destroying something. "Too late for what?"

Tom stopped him turning the sphere again. "I think I know what happened to the scientists who came here in 1908."

"Well don't leave me in suspense. What happened to them?"

"They activated that sphere."

Chapter Sixty-One

Sam moved back from the sphere.

A total of eight markings glowed red. He looked at the device as he would a modern day computer, searching for a delete button or backspace. Surely whatever purpose the device had, the ancient people of Atlantis must have had a means of activating it or deactivating it.

“We need to find something else. There must be another device around here that will help me clear it. Come on, I cringe to think I’ve inadvertently triggered the next cycle of human life or lack thereof, on this planet.”

“Already on it,” Tom said while turning over bits of debris within the temple.

Thirty minutes later, Sam found something on the sphere itself. He was so focused on the sphere that it took a while to notice it was now projecting a small red light on the ceiling. “I’ve got something, Tom.”

Tom came back and stared at the glow above the sphere. “I’m sure that wasn’t there before.”

“No, so am I.”

“I’ve seen those markings inside the Mayan pyramid, too.” Tom paused for a moment and then said, “I think Billie said they were ancient Egyptian measurements of time.”

Sam looked at the projection again. “You’re right! They are images of time, but I’ll need my tablet to compute the exact time.”

Sam locked his machine in park mode, as he would with a car, and then climbed down inside his massive ADS machine. There was enough room there to eat, drink, and store basic necessities. In Sam’s case, that meant his high powered computer tablet and its several terabytes worth of information.

He quickly scrolled through his ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics page until he reached the section regarding the recording of time.

“Oh, that’s not good!” Sam said, when his initial worst fear came to an even more apocalyptic fruition.

“What now?”

“What other devices do you know display the time when they’re activated?”

“A bomb!”

“And didn’t the Secretary of Defense say something about the scientists at the time calculating the force to level 10 million pine trees at around 50 megatons, or the equivalent of about a thousand nuclear bombs? It might be a kinda good idea to find out just how much time we have.”

“All right, I’m working on it.” Inside the ADS machine, Sam quickly opened his advanced linguistics program on his tablet, designed for cracking these types of problems.

“The first line is years, months, days, hours...”

“The image just changed.”

“Christ, it’s counting down!”

“Okay I have it!”

“How much time have we got?” Tom asked hurriedly.

“Two years, twenty weeks, five hours and ten minutes.”

Tom stared at the projection on the wall again. “But that doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not?”

“Because the last image changes every second.”

“Which means...” Sam looked up and counted the lines of images. There were four. That meant, if the first line represented seconds, the second must represent minutes, the third hours, and the fourth, weeks. “Holy shit, we have just over two weeks!”

“Sam, we didn’t just activate this – it was already running, we just brought up the display counter!”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because the Secretary of Defense told you that everything from the Tunguska event was sealed, only to be reopened in just over two weeks from now, when none of it would matter! Damn it Sam, we’ve got to get out of here.”

Chapter Sixty-Two

“We’re not leaving until we find whatever the hell it was that Billie sent us here to find,” Sam said. “She told me that she’d only just come back from Atlantis, and that it was important that she find something in Amsterdam to help her with her discovery. Now, there’s no way she dived to this sort of depth on her own, so that means to me, that there’s another Atlantis.”

“You mean this isn’t Atlantis?”

Sam started to realize the truth. “No, this isn’t Atlantis. It was created by the ancient Atlantean people, but it doesn’t match up in any way with Plato’s description of its size or grandeur. Okay, if the Atlantean Archive we found in Tibet was created as a library of the events in Atlantis, like an almanac, then could it be possible that the other survivors attempted to rebuild Atlantis, here?”

“It’s possible. But why go to all the trouble of building a place like this if it served no purpose?”

“No, it wasn’t just a shrine to Atlantis. This was replacing it completely. Atlantis wasn’t just a place in ancient times. Atlantis was a machine that connected mortals with the stars. How or why, I have no idea. But it has the ability to yield immense power, as the American expedition discovered in 1908, when they too accidentally activated it.”

“But what good is that to us, if we can’t stop this bomb?” Tom asked.

“Nothing, unless we can find out what Billie knew about this place. There must be something that we can use to help her.”

Sam continued to search the room.

At its center, where Poseidon’s golden statue had most likely been removed, a series of strange shapes covered an area several feet wide. Placed precisely equidistant to the towering dome, it was impossible to believe that they were simply shapes.

“It looks like something important was here... or at least it was important once upon a time?” Sam said.

“Yeah, whatever it was – it’s easy to believe that it was long ago destroyed – most likely by whatever caused the Tunguska event.”

“Meaning we’ve lost whatever it was that Billie wanted us to find?”

“That was Billie’s writing in Nepal. She must have wanted us to come here for something,” Sam said.

“Or she specifically wanted us off their tail?” Tom pointed out.

“She intentionally sent us on a wild goose chase, and made us dive in frigid waters?”

“Possibly.”

Sam looked up at the ceiling again. The place had been stripped of all its orichalcum by the Russians years ago. Any writings on the wall were long destroyed. “What if it wasn’t such a case of wanting to send us here, but instead, a case of wanting to send someone else away from her?”

“You mean, her captives told her to write this GPS location?”

“No, she could have easily made up whatever she wanted. Only a handful of people in the world can interpret the ancient language of the Master Builders. Whatever reason she had to send us here, it was her decision to write it.”

“Which can mean only one thing.”

Tom looked at him expectantly.

“That she’s even more afraid that someone else will beat her to Atlantis.”

“And that someone must be on to us? Of course! No wonder she was trying to send us away. Someone else wants the coordinates of Atlantis.”

“Of course, Andrew Brandt! The man the mob leader from Nice warned us about. Originally I assumed that he was one and the same as Billie’s captor, but after the events in Nepal, I’m not so sure. Her captor could have sent a separate army in to kill us on Kangchenjunga, but if that was the case, she wouldn’t have sent us to the wrong place.”

“Which means...” Tom said.

“We’d better get out of here, while we still can.”

Sam was about to step into the water which covered the third challenge and leave the dry dome of Poseidon, when he felt the slightest of tremors under his feet.

Followed by the sound of a loud jet screaming through the water above.

“That can’t be good,” Tom said.

“No, if my ears don’t deceive me, I’d say someone’s just launched a torpedo.”

Chapter Sixty-Three

The tone of the seemingly innocent whirl of the torpedo's electric motor increased sharply. Sam scanned the room for something structurally strong enough to resist whatever was about to rain down upon them. A single archway at the entrance to the room was the best he could come up with in the short time they had.

"Over there Tom, at the entrance. It's our best chance of survival."

"I see it!"

The two men began moving toward it as fast as they could – their ADS machines at a pace no faster than a walk.

The dome of Poseidon held true to its strength and resisted the destruction by the torpedo. But the ground below them shook violently.

At a depth of nearly five hundred feet of water, little had touched the ancient site since the Russians had rendered it worthless in 1908 during the Tunguska event.

Tom was the first to step into the water again. He returned before Sam had set foot into the second level of the temple.

"There's no way out. The roof has collapsed and about a million tons of rubble is now blocking our way."

Sam casually looked at the counter on his mechanical wrist. "So, we have around 36 hours to find another way out, before our life support runs out of juice."

"I don't know what your plan is Sam, but we already walked around the dome of Poseidon. There's only one way in and one way out. And that way out is now blocked."

A smile came over Sam's face. "I have an idea there's another way out – assuming it too hasn't been blocked."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because this was built as a sister temple to whatever Atlantis Billie went to."

"So what?"

"So there's always a second way out when it comes to Atlantis."

"Of course, but I don't see any."

"Remember how we found the remains of three challenges. Test of strength, wisdom, and sacrifice? With a fourth name being wealth?"

“Yes, and the fourth being the wealth of Poseidon, which our predecessors appear to have stolen.”

“What if the wealth of Poseidon was just a ruse -- a final step to dissuade any intruders from looking further inside the temple?”

“To what?”

“The true wealth of Atlantis – the code. If our processors got it wrong, and the device sunk Atlantis nearly five hundred feet below the surface of the earth and wiped out hundreds of miles of tree lines, what power do you think the actual code itself might possess?”

“I have no idea, what?”

“Neither do I, but I intend to find out. And in doing so, we’re going to get out of here, and more importantly, we’re going to find the code to Atlantis before the timer reaches zero.”

Chapter Sixty-Four

Sam looked around the large temple of Poseidon. The place somehow appeared smaller since the cave-in to the entrance. It was psychological, of course -- the temple was still enormous. Somehow the sheer knowledge that their exit had been removed introduced a sensation of claustrophobia Sam hadn't experienced since he was a boy.

His older brother, Danny, had taken him cave diving for the first time. He was only ten years old, but his entire family had been mad keen divers, and he'd been diving all around the world since he was six. Sam laughed when he thought about it – child protection services would have had a field day if they knew what risks his father's adventurous spirit had brought him.

Being the youngest in the family, he was always the most motivated to keep up and prove his ability. It was that inspiration that made him beat his brother, who was nearly three years older than him, at a freediving competition in the Blue Hole, Belize. His brother was so mad that later that day Danny asked him to go for a dive to the most amazing cave – that was, if he wasn't too scared to swim through a few tunnels first? Eager to please, and knowing a challenge when it was being set, Sam had been quick to accept.

They had gone on the dive, and his brother had led in through a series of underwater caverns and tunnels. Presumably Danny had made the dive a number of times with his father, and confidently knew that there was only one way in and one out. But despite the appearance of multiple directions, it was fundamentally a very simple cave dive. To Sam, however, it was the scariest thing on earth.

By the second tunnel, the place became quite dark, and by the third, only their hand held flashlights provided them with any light. And even that was extremely inadequate for the conditions. Then, feeling only just on top of his nerves, Sam watched in horror when Danny turned off his own light and began swimming at full speed. Sam tried to follow, but couldn't keep up and soon lost him. To this day, he could still remember the sensation of panic as it built up in him – he was forty feet below the surface of the water, lost in a labyrinth of caverns and tunnels, his light barely showed what was three feet in front of him, and now, his brother had disappeared.

He began to hyperventilate – the gravest of diving mistakes, because it's the surest way to waste all of your valuable air. And then he stopped. *What am I afraid of? If Danny can navigate through here, so can I.* Almost as suddenly as the fear overtook him, Sam forced himself

to slow his breathing. Work the problem, not make it worse. Soon, the terror of claustrophobia turned to euphoria as he empowered himself to take control of the situation.

Soon, he turned around and slowly navigated his way back to where he started. He looked at his dive watch – only five minutes had passed since his brother had intentionally lost him in the tunnel. An act tantamount to killing him if he hadn't maintained control.

Sam was about to swim to the surface, when he had an idea. He swam to the side of the cave's entrance, and found a sinkhole – the entrance to a tunnel that disappeared deep below the rock wall. He dived deeper until he was resting several feet inside and then switched off his flashlight.

After ten minutes Danny came swimming out the original tunnel's entrance, swimming faster than Sam had ever seen him go. He watched as his brother swam to the surface, and then returned to the tunnel in a panic.

Sam recalled that feeling so well. He had bested his big brother, who thought he'd got the best of him by trying to scare him.

He waited at the entrance to the cave system, laughing, like the ten-year-old child that he was. And then he looked at the air supply. There was less than 50 BAR remaining. His brother was now risking his life to save him from the being trapped. Sam's laughter turned to fear as he realized that he might now have killed his brother.

Looking at the remaining 50 BAR Sam quickly swam into the tunnel again.

He shined his flashlight on his brother who immediately turned to swim toward him. The two turned and swam back to the entrance fast. Danny, who'd been exerting the most effort attempting to find him, reached Sam holding his dive gauge – and gave it to him.

The gauge was empty.

Danny made the signal indicating he was out of air. Sam handed Danny his own 2nd emergency regulator, and the two began buddy breathing, as they slowly ascended to five feet.

Sam looked at his own gauge – 20 BAR. It wasn't much. Especially when two people were breathing it. Maybe three to four minutes. No more.

The surface was just above them, but both had already overstayed their No Decompress Time, which meant that they would have to spend time decompressing. Sam might get away with it, but Danny had already swum to the surface and back again looking for him – an event akin to shaking up a coke bottle. He needed to remain

underwater for at least another ten minutes.

Sam wrote on his dive slate – Dad’s emergency air tank!

Danny nodded, and began swimming toward the boat. Their dad, although a risk taker, had always insisted on leaving a full tank of air, on a line, at the five-foot mark below his boat when they were diving. They had been here for nearly a week, but his father never brought it in.

Sam followed his brother in awe as Danny managed to expertly navigate to their father’s boat four hundred feet away. To an expert diver who’d been paying attention it was simple, but to 10-year-old Sam Reilly, Danny’s ability paralleled mythical wonder.

Their air tank gave out thirty-odd feet away.

And the two continued to paddle their fins with slow, strong movements until they reached the tank. Each of them immediately grabbed the tank’s regulator, and began taking giant breaths of fresh air in turn.

Danny smiled at him.

And Sam watched him mouth the words, “Thank you.”

In front of him, Danny held up his diving slate with the words, “I’m sorry.” Sam took it, and wrote something else, “It was an accident.”

Both boys knew it was a lie. Sam had proven himself to his older brother, and more importantly, he’d proven his ability to himself. The two boys became men, and neither ever spoke about that incident while Danny was alive. But his older brother always knew the truth, and until the day he died, he respected Sam and did everything he could to look after him.

Back in Poseidon’s temple, Sam smiled as he slowed his breathing, gaining control, as he had always been able to, of his friend, his constant companion, claustrophobia. It was always there, but instead of his enemy, he had made it his ally. Something to make him focus.

Tom grabbed him. “You okay Sam? You looked like you were a thousand miles away.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah, I suppose I was. Just thinking of the past.”

“Well, I hope it gave you some sort of insight about our future. Because I’ve made three circuits of this temple, and I can’t see anything that leads to the fourth room.”

“As a matter of fact, I think it may have.”

“Really?”

“What do you do when you see exactly what you want?”

“You focus on it. You get tunnel vision, and that’s all you see.”

“That’s right.”

Sam then showed Tom the passage that described Poseidon’s temple.

In the interior of the temple the roof was of ivory, curiously wrought everywhere with gold and silver and orichalcum; and all the other parts, the walls and pillars and floor, they coated with orichalcum. In the temple, they placed statutes of gold: there was the god himself standing in a chariot – a charioteer of six winged horses – and at such a size that he touched the roof of the building with his head...

It carried on for a while, but Sam stopped reading.

“Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“Poseidon wasn’t just a giant, with his head almost touching the room. Poseidon was looking at the true wealth of the room. It was stored above his head.”

“But there was nothing above his head.” Tom looked up at the ceiling. The rest of the entire room was covered in precious metals, ivory and gemstones, but directly above him was simply wrought iron.

“That’s it! It’s tunnel vision. Whether it was the Russians or our scientists who actually reached here first, they stripped the entire room of everything of value, but never once did they consider what was above that piece of iron!”

“Okay, so then what’s above that piece of iron?”

“I think there’s another room – with answers!”

“That’s great Sam.” Tom looked around. “In case you haven’t noticed, that ceiling’s about thirty feet high. And unless you’re seeing something that I don’t, I have no idea how you’re planning on reaching it.”

Sam stared at the water fountain and replied, “I might just have a solution.”

Chapter Sixty-Five

"The water won't enter here because Poseidon's temple is in the shape of a half dome," Sam noted. "Therefore, when Atlantis flooded originally, everywhere became submerged except this point. But what if we break the dome?"

"How do you plan to do that from down here?"

"With this." Sam lifted his right mechanical arm, and the head of a rocket appeared.

"Wow, what have you got there?"

"Given our previous problems, I wasn't convinced I wanted to enter Atlantis without superior firepower. Consequently, I had an armorer friend of mine redesign an RPG 27 so that it could be retrofitted into our ADS machine."

"Ah, Sam... have you really thought this through? If we blow apart the ceiling, what do you think the pressure difference is going to do to us?"

"I'd say we have a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. Maybe twenty-five to seventy-five. Why – have you got a better idea?"

Tom shrugged his massive mechanical shoulders. "Guess not."

"Then that answers it," Sam said and fired the RPG directly at the ceiling, above where Poseidon was supposed to stand.

The entire roof exploded, revealing the entrance to another temple.

Sam looked around, "I told you there was a room behind it!"

"That's great, but I don't see any water flooding in here?"

"No, neither do I. Let's check out the cave-in again. Is it possible the boulders have blocked the water from coming in?"

"Yes, that could be it."

"Do you want to go check it out while I work on plan B?"

"What's plan B?"

"You don't want to know yet..."

Tom returned ten minutes later. "Yep, the cave-in has blocked any water getting in here. So, unless you can jump about thirty feet, I have no idea how we're going to get to the next level."

"That's where plan B is going to have to come in."

"What's plan B?"

“We’re going to flood this room using Poseidon’s own bath water.”

“The fountain of the Gods?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“That’s great, but it’s still draining at hundreds of cubic feet of water per minute.”

Sam grinned. “That’s why we’re going to have to block the drain.”

Chapter Sixty-Six

Four red marble columns, each nearly ten feet tall, adorned the room. Resting on top of each, like a pedestal, was a ball made of blue green marble, all a different shade of light. Sam imagined each one served some type of symbolic references to the seasons of the year. If he'd had more time, Sam would have liked to examine them better, but the value of archeology always came second to those still living.

"Help me knock this thing over," Sam said.

Sam rested the massive shoulder of his ADS machine against the solid column and pushed. Nothing happened. Tom then stepped in and locked their two ADS machines together so that their combined hydraulic power could push the column over.

"Okay, try now," Tom said.

The column moved, but only slightly. Not enough to knock it over.

Sam gritted his teeth and said, "Let's try pushing it back and forth until it moves."

By the fifth go, the entire column tipped to the floor – sending the marbled earth rolling.

Built into the side of Poseidon's temple, the fountain of the gods flowed miraculously as it had done for thousands of years. Still remarkably flowing into a drain which dispersed the water somewhere. It was like a flood of hot and cold water. But where did it come from, and where the hell was it going?

Sam lifted the large marble ball and placed it on the drain pipe, blocking it. Instantly the magical water began spilling out and covering the room. Within minutes they were standing knee deep. The two turned and swam back to the entrance fast.

The level rose rapidly until Sam and Tom were once more in the water their ADS machines were designed for. Capable of movement outside of water, the machines were built to perform highly sophisticated underwater tasks, and were capable of much higher speeds and maneuverability in it than out.

Despite being massive, Poseidon's temple filled with water quickly. They decreased their buoyancy so that they rested on the temple's floor instead of the ceiling, where powerful currents were forming as the water tried to squeeze through the little opening.

"We'll give it another twenty minutes to fill the room above with water, and then we go!" Sam said.

“Sounds good to me.”

After waiting for the current to settle, a good indicator that the next room had filled with water, Sam moved toward the opening. Attached to Tom’s ADS machine via a tether, in case the current became dangerously strong, his quad propulsion unit whirled into life as he shot through the opening he’d made.

No more than a few feet inside the second room Sam said, “It’s safe to come up. And I think you’re going to want to see this!”

The room was relatively small compared to Poseidon’s temple and almost entirely barren, with the exception of a massive picture on one wall. Etched into a solid piece of glowing red orichalcum, fourteen feet tall and equally wide, was a depiction of an island, and its surrounding coastline.

“So that’s orichalcum?” Tom asked.

“It appears so.”

“I don’t understand. If all that wealth underneath us was merely a ruse to stop people finding this image, what the hell is so valuable on that island?”

“The code to Atlantis.”

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Sam stared at the painting as though he were mesmerized by it somehow. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tom look around the rest of the room trying to see where the water had gone. If the water came into the room, that meant the air had gone out, and for that to happen, there had to be an exit. And he was going to find it.

Sam gave it little thought. He knew he was right about the Atlanteans. They needed redundancy in their systems, and that meant escape routes. If he was right about the greatest wealth of Atlantis being hidden inside this room, then he just assumed he was right about the next part.

Right on cue, Tom said, “Look at this. I think we just found your priest hole.”

It was a large tunnel leading downwards. The water could be seen where it had been flooded and Sam hoped that it hadn’t been destroyed by the torpedo.

“I just wonder where it leads now that Atlantis is nowhere near where it was supposed to be when that thing was built?”

“No idea, but I’m sure it will get us out of here. Of course, I’m not too sure where we’ll go from there. If Andrew Brandt and his goons are smart, they’ll be waiting for us on the surface.”

“And even if they aren’t, it’s unlikely they’re just going to have left our Snow Cat there waiting for us. Which means we’re going to have a mighty long, cold, walk.”

Sam remained staring at the wall for another ten minutes before Tom interrupted him again. Like a map, the place depicted a coastline, and in the middle a small island. At the center of the island were those five rings Sam was starting to associate with Atlantis.

Above them, he noticed that the ceiling of the cavern was surrounded by celestial markings. There were notes, which appeared like an ancient almanac, with the image of shooting stars next to it. The math and the astronomy were too much for Sam to make any useful sense of. He took a dozen photos of the ceiling as well as a three-minute digital video. With the exception of a few stars he recognized, the entire ceiling was beyond him, but one thing appeared obvious – the code to Atlantis was somehow tied with stars.

He studied the map for a few more minutes, mesmerized by the detail. How a land based population could gather such detail without the aid of satellite imaging, he would never understand.

Tom interrupted his concentration. "If we take a few pictures of it, we could get Elise to run it with every coastline in the world for its closest match. It would have changed substantially in the past eleven thousand years, but if we run all known images of coastlines with a plus or minus variance of water levels, we might just get lucky."

Sam grinned. "I already know where that is."

"Really? Then what are you trying to work out?"

"How the hell I'm going to convince the Mayor of New York that we have to dig one heck of a hole in Manhattan."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

The Andre Sephora slowed to an idle along the Congo River. They were getting close to where the pygmy king had told them it would be.

Billie looked at the little pygmy, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his own adventure as their guide to the real temple of Poseidon. "You're certain it's here?"

"Yes."

Billie looked up. "Jason, what's our depth sounding at here?"

"There's a lot of water below us, Dr. Swan."

"How deep, exactly?"

"Seven hundred feet. Much too deep to dive."

"Okay, keep us here."

"You can't dive to that sort of depth. It may as well be the bottom or the Mariana Trench for all its accessibility."

"Leave that problem to me," Billie said, frustrated. "Zanzibe, how certain are you this is the place?"

"It's here Dr. Swan. I promise you. My father took me to this place to worship as a boy, as did his father, and his father's father, since the great Congo River first swallowed the temple."

She studied his face. He was certain. That was enough for her. "Okay, we stay here."

Billie laughed at the irony of it all.

"What's so funny Dr. Swan?" Edward asked.

"The temple of Poseidon lies at the river bed below us at a depth of nearly 720 feet! As though that's not impossible to dive on its own, the river is one of the most powerful and turbulent on the planet. And the only two people in the world who are not only dumb enough, but possibly skilled enough to have a chance of reaching it, I sent to Siberia on a wild goose chase!"

Edward looked at her. "Are you finished with your rant yet?"

"I think that pretty much sums it up."

"Good, because there's still work to be done. We have less than two weeks to save the world, and I intend to do so."

"Did you happen to bring a deep sea submarine with you?"

"No, Dr. Swan I did not. But don't worry, I did bring two submersible ROVs."

“Of course! We don’t need to bring anything up with us. All we need is to see the inside of that temple and the first half of its code!”

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Billie sat in the computer room, watching the live feed from the camera mounted at the nose of their submersible remotely operated vehicle, or ROV for short. Even from the safety of their sports cruiser, the water below appeared turbulent. Edward struggled to maintain the little ROV in position, while the river constantly attempted to force it to run away.

The ROV was connected to the neutrally buoyant tether which ran from the back of the Andre Sephora like a giant spool of wool. At the base of the monitor a number of instrumental readings were displayed, including depth, water speed, and temperature.

Sinking past the six-hundred-foot depth marker, Edward suddenly felt his controls become more stable. The water speed increased and the temperature warmed.

“What just happened?” Billie asked.

“We seem to have entered a small eddy,” Edward said, his fingers tapping rapidly over the controls.

The ROV began to rise quickly. Releasing more air, Edward tried to reduce its buoyancy and then powered forward at full speed.

Nothing happened.

The ROV was stuck in an upward spiral. Billie watched at the submersible became helpless to the whims of the deep river eddy.

“Can you do anything about it?” she asked.

Edward took his fingers off the controls. “Nothing that I haven’t already tried. Now I just get to watch and see what happens.”

A moment later the image on the screen showed the ROV had punched through the upwards spiraling eddy and was now on the other side. Edward’s fingers continued to work the controls in fast, specific motions.

“We’re out of it.”

“Hey, you’re increasing your depth again – fast!” Billie said noticing the sounder showed the ROV had dropped another 50 feet since penetrating the spiraling wall of the eddy.

Edward looked toward the depth gauge. “You’re right, too fast! We must be caught in a deep river waterfall.”

The spool of tether, hanging on the back deck, began running as though a giant marlin had taken the bait.

“Mark, get out the back will you,” Edward said. “I need you to

secure the tether and make sure we don't lose it!"

"Understood, sir."

Billie turned to stop Mark. "Don't bother."

"Why not?" Edward asked.

"Because we just snapped the ROV's tether line."

Chapter Seventy

The second ROV was ready to launch twenty minutes later. It was slightly larger, and Edward explained that he was worried the submersible may have trouble accessing the temple of Poseidon, especially if some of the challenges were still intact. Zanzibe had assured them that the temple of their Gods was left unarmed while it sunk into the river so they could study it and try to replicate it as best they could.

Lowered into the water by a load-carrying umbilical cable, the second ROV remained in its tether management system, known as a TMS, until it reached the bottom of the river. The TMS was a garage-like device, which housed the ROV during the lowering process through the splash zone and then worked to lengthen and shorten the tether so the effect of cable drag where there were underwater currents was minimized.

The TMS stopped just short of the bed of the river, so that no additional silt was stirred up by the ROV's propellers.

"Well, that's something at least," Billie said. "Can you turn the main LEDs on?"

"As you wish," Edward replied and flicked the powerful lights on.

The place was completely lacking in environmental light, and reminded Billie of the time not so long ago when Sam Reilly had dragged her from her research in the Antarctic to help his friend, Tom Bower, explore a Mayan Pyramid nearly half a mile under the ocean.

Surreal in its isolation, the place where the ROV now explored was more distant than nearly every other place on earth. At first it appeared devoid of all marine life, but when Edward displayed the view of the downward camera, the riverbed seemed to be swarming with giant fresh water-crayfish. Although what they were eating to sustain themselves, she had no idea.

"Any sign of our temple yet?" she asked.

"Not yet. I'm just waiting for the sonar to come into view." Edward grinned. "There she is!"

Zanzibe sat still and watched the computer screen. Although he said nothing, his face depicted bewilderment and awe at the first sight of his God's true temple, a sight which no one had seen for nearly eleven thousand years.

The ROV began moving toward the temple. Its powerful electric

motor propelled it at a speed upwards of 30 knots. The TMS was attached to the rear deck of the Andre Sephora via a full umbilical system, and then the TMS ran a separate tether to the ROV, making it much more versatile, while providing it with infinite power to exhaust.

The real dome cover of the temple of Poseidon came into view, and for a moment, Billie found herself holding her breath. Like the replica which the pygmies had constructed many years ago, the dome of this one was covered in orichalcum, and stood at the center of several deep indentations, each one progressively getting deeper.

Somewhere inside there would be an open doorway to the answers they needed. She forced herself to breathe out and consciously remember to breathe in. Looking around the room, she noticed that the temple had a similar effect on everyone else in the room.

Only Edward, who was so focused on the need of their mission, appeared immune to its glory. "Okay, Zanzibe, do you have any suggestions where our door is going to be?"

"I've never seen it, but if it's anything like ours, then the door should be down there, at the end."

The ROV moved quickly toward the end of the deepest moat, where the large stone opening stood without its door.

Edward looked at Zanzibe. "Thanks."

There it moved through the first tunnel and into the challenge of strength. With the mechanisms of each of the challenges long since corroded or rotted away, Edward was able easily navigate through to the next room. The memory of trying to beat the challenges the pygmies had set out in their replica appeared fresh in his mind as he navigated the ROV through the temple's entrance. Its eerie light scattered in the dark rooms, and Billie watched as Edward's hands began to shake at the recent memory they stirred.

Propelling itself over the chasm that had long ago lost its bridge and then finally past the pendulum of sacrifice, the ROV quickly made its way toward the temple of Poseidon. Billie placed her hand on Edward's shoulder. She didn't say anything. Nor did she have to. They were both there. The sight instantly brought back the memory of him preparing to sacrifice his life for hers. In the end, the test had been merely to see if one person would willingly sacrifice themselves so the other person could live, and consequently, he had not been killed in the process. It was still one hell of an offering.

The ROV turned the last corner and entered the ancient temple

dedicated to Poseidon – the God of the Sea.

And there it stopped.

“What the hell happened?” Billie asked.

Edward reversed and then plugged in a separate controller. “I was worried this might be the case.”

“What is it?”

“The dome’s dry. Don’t you remember in the pygmy replica, the temple of Poseidon remained dry?”

“Of course, why didn’t we think of that? I don’t suppose your ROV has a pair of wheels?”

Edward grinned. “No, but it’s got a killer set of tank tracks!”

A new sound could be heard coming from the ROV’s audio – it was the grating noise of its tank tracks turning. A moment later, the ROV punched through the water and entered the dry world of Poseidon’s temple.

It was larger than what the pygmies had recreated. Nearly twice as long and more than that high. As the ROV shined its exterior lights on the temple, the gold reflected everywhere.

“My God, there’s enough gold there to make St Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican appear poor,” Edward said in awe.

Spotting the golden statue of Poseidon himself, still standing on top of his chariot and drawn by the massive six winged horse, Edward drove the ROV toward what they had come for. Edward then changed the view to one of the cameras mounted above and designed to look up.

The entire roof was covered in intricately carved ivory, depicting a battle of the Gods so great it would have terrified the strongest of mere mortals. Protected by eleven thousand years of isolation within the vault, the carvings appeared perfectly intact. They were curiously wrought with gold, silver and orichalcum. Next to the monstrous horse’s head, which nearly struck the ceiling, was a placard made of pure orichalcum.

Edward pressed the zoom button, and it came into focus.

“There it is gentlemen – and my dear Dr. Swan – the code to Atlantis.”

Chapter Seventy-One

After making several copies, Billie superimposed it on the second half of the code to Atlantis, completing the image.

“This is it! We have it. This is the missing link for the code to Atlantis!”

Edward embraced her. “I knew you were the right person for the job Dr. Swan! Thank you!”

Jason, the skipper, burst through the door. “We’ve got company.”

Billie and Edward moved to the window. Grabbing a pair of binoculars, Billie zoomed in on the boats moving toward them. There were two of them. Both inflatable military watercraft – most likely Zodiacs – and closing in on a quarter of a mile up river.

Aboard were several men carrying AK47s.

Edward swore. “It’s probably someone from any number of Congo’s rebel armies.” Placing his binoculars back on their holder, he said, “Jason, get us out of here. The Andre Sephora will outrun these petty war criminals.”

“I’m already on it,” Jason replied, kicking the sports craft’s engine into gear.

Edward looked at Mark. “Ready the team. Make certain they’re ready to repel boarders if they do reach us.”

“Understood,” Mark replied, leaving the room.

Billie felt reassured as the Rolls Royce water jets kicked into life and the Andre Sephora stood up on her bow wave. It would be impossible for the rebels to keep up with them once they reached their cruising speed.

“I told you we’d be all right,” Edward said.

Billie went to acknowledge him, but right then, the engines cut out and the Andre Sephora sunk its bow back into the river.

Chapter Seventy-Two

A helicopter flew toward them from the opposite direction. It was covered in military camouflage, but showed no sign of country of origin. Edward was reassured by the knowledge that none of the rebels in the area possessed such machinery.

“Mark! It looks like we’re going to need our plan B! I want the Gatling guns ready to fire, and I want someone to prepare the anti-aircraft rockets to fire when that thing gets closer!”

“Already on it boss!”

At the edge of the room, Dr. Swan typed rapidly on her laptop, downloading all the information she would need to reach the inner sanctum of Atlantis, including the now complete code to Atlantis.

Edward smiled at her resilience as he watched Dr. Swan hide the contents on a device no larger than a fingernail. She then prepared to destroy her entire workstation, including her laptop, if the worst were to happen.

Edward could only imagine what would happen if the code to Atlantis fell into the wrong hands. Behind them, he could see that the two zodiacs had slowed down and the men were preparing to board. He saw the men at the front, carrying AK47s, swing grappling hooks while yelling war cries in their native language. Others simply fired at his hull.

Surely they must know that a vessel like his would never enter the Congo without arming herself well enough to defend herself!

“Okay Mark, time to destroy them all!”

Edward brought up the automated defense system, and placed an asterisk over each of the zodiacs. The computer system then highlighted the perfect angle of firing, and a microcomputer fired.

The rattle of the four Gatling guns turning filled the room.

But no rounds were fired.

All four Gatling guns had had their rounds removed from their rollers.

For the first time, since the arrival of the rebel army, Edward felt genuine fear.

His heart pounded as he realized he had a traitor aboard.

“Quick Mark! Get the men on deck!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that Mr. Worthington.” Edward looked up, only to see that Mark had unlatched the safety on his own weapon

and pointed it directly at him.

Edward looked around the deck of his ship for his other men. Then it struck him – no one had come to his aid, because they couldn't. They were locked below the deck. His most trusted bodyguard had betrayed him.

“I have to know, Mark. Why?”

Mark grinned. “I’m sorry, but in my profession loyalty is only ever to the highest bidder.”

“But you set the price and I always happily paid for it!”

“Yes, and I was happy with that price. But then, along came Atlantis. And that, my friend, can offer me more than all the gold in the world. It can offer me unlimited power. Even if half the crap that you and Dr. Swan have discussed over the past few weeks ends up being correct, I’m going to be a very rich man.”

Edward looked at him and tried to speak. He faltered, unable to find words to make any sense of the betrayal, and then he didn’t have to.

Three shots fired in rapid succession.

Looking up, Edward was surprised to find he barely felt them. Then he saw the three clean bullet holes open up in a narrow grouping between Mark’s eyes – it wasn’t his own life that had just ended.

Behind him, Billie had already lowered her Glock.

“That was close. Again, Dr. Swan, I believe I owe you my life.”

Billie gritted her teeth. The boarders had already secured the Andre Sephora. “I’m not sure I’ve done you any more good than to prolong the inevitable.”

Several men came in and grabbed them. He noticed, thankfully, that Dr. Swan hadn’t felt the need to fight to the death. So long as she was alive, there was still hope.

The helicopter hovered just above the front deck of the Andre Sephora. A man stepped out of the aircraft. Edward recognized the man instantly. How could he not? After all, that man might just be the most dangerous man on earth.

“Andrew Brandt! I should have guessed you were behind this attack!”

“Mr. Edward Worthington.” Andrew looked at Billie, struggling to get free from the soldier who held her head in an arm lock capable of killing her in seconds. “And Dr. Swan. How nice to finally meet you. I cannot say how pleased I have been with your efforts. I could

never have deciphered the code to Atlantis on my own.”

He then looked at Mark lying dead on the ground. “I see that you found the employment of my associate, Mr. Mark Armel, unsatisfactory.” Andrew laughed at his own joke. “No matter, he has served my purpose already.”

The commander of the soldiers who held them approached Andrew. “What do you want me to do with all of them?”

“I’ll keep the girl. You never know when she might be useful.” Andrew grinned lasciviously. “As for the rest of them, kill them.”

Billie swore at Andrew. “You’ll never work it out. I’ll die before helping you.”

“Don’t worry, my good Dr. Swan. Your death is certainly on the cards, but first there are a few things I’d like some help with.”

Several shots were fired before anyone knew where they’d come from. Zanzibe, the little pygmy king, had taken refuge in a fishing box, too small from any normal sized person to squeeze. He’d then, released three quick bursts from his Uzi. Edward then felt the man’s strong hands pull him free from his now dead captor.

In front of him, Andrew had already moved to take Dr. Swan.

The soldiers at the front of the boat quickly moved to take the back of the Andre Sephora. Machine gun fire pelted through the inner workings of the ship.

“We have to go,” Zanzibe said.

Edward followed him to the back of the ship. “What about the rest of my men? Those trapped below deck?”

“No one’s trapped. They all worked for Mark.”

“Then where can we go?”

Edward followed Zanzibe to the back of the ship. “I’ve laid explosives. The ship’s going to explode any moment now!”

The two dived into the water.

Before their heads resurfaced, the echo of a massive explosion, sent a shockwave ringing through their ears.

Edward and Zanzibe swam as long as their breaths would hold them before breaking the surface again. He looked back at the Andre Sephora. There was nothing left. Already three hundred feet away, Andrew’s helicopter departed. “There goes the code to Atlantis – and more important, the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

Chapter Seventy-Three

The tunnel led down much lower than anywhere they'd been inside Atlantis. After nearly an hour, the ancient escape route turned and they began the long journey in an upwards direction. Sam looked at his survival time in his ADS machine – they were down to six hours. They would need to begin the process of surfacing soon, if they were to make it in time. Sam swam around the next bend in the tunnel, revealing the opening inside a small cave overlooking the outside of Poseidon's temple.

"What do you think? Are Andrew's men taking chances that we're dead or will they be waiting for us on the surface?" Tom asked.

Sam was about to answer, and then noticed that next to the extensive outer dome, a sad-looking Snow Cat stood looking very out of place, nearly 500 feet below the surface.

"Oh yeah, they weren't taking any chances. Now we're stuck about three hundred miles from anywhere, in the Siberian winter without a vehicle!"

"All right, let's go face the elements." Tom began the systematic process of ascending.

The massive facemask of Sam's ADS machine broached the surface of Lake Cheko. Tentative that a second attack might be imminent, he decided not to return through the hole they'd originally created. Instead, he built a new one as close to the shore as possible.

He scanned the area quickly, seeing nothing but white. Then, switching on his helmet-mounted infrared monitor, he scanned the area above. Reassured nothing except snow surrounded them, Sam climbed out and made his way to the edge of the lake.

"Okay Tom, I think we're clear. Your turn."

"Coming right up."

Sam dug a makeshift snow cave with the remaining power of his ADS machine. And then carefully began exiting the awesome machine. Opening the exit below him, he climbed down. After opening the antennae to his satellite phone, he pressed the call button.

"Did you find out where Atlantis is?" The Secretary of Defense was quick to answer.

"Yes, Manhattan!" Sam replied. "But there's more that we learnt, too."

"It's going to activate in the next 48 hours." She said the words slowly, with her usual air of superiority.

“You knew?” Sam asked accusingly.

“Of course I bloody well know what the Atlantis device does. We were there in 1908! We knew it’s due to be triggered again, but we just prayed like hell that the second damn temple wasn’t on our side of the Atlantic!”

“We still have to work out precisely where, and we don’t have long to do so.”

“Yes, leave that to me, I’ll put all our manpower into it,” she said. “But do you have the code to Atlantis?”

“No.”

“Then it’s all over, anyway,” the Secretary Defense said.

“No it’s not. Because I think Billie might have found it.”

“I thought you said that awful woman had been kidnapped?”

“She has been. Most likely by a man named Andrew Brandt. From what information I’ve gotten on him. He’s a Rhodes Scholar. He was exceptional at math, and appeared to be in the process of being groomed for a position with NASA.”

“So, what happened to him? Why didn’t we get him?”

“Altruism or science for the betterment of mankind wasn’t part of his plan. Instead, he took the fortune his father had left him and opened up a merchant bank – The Phoenix Associates. From what we’ve learned about him, he specializes in unique and often highly illegal acquisitions. His problems started well before he was born. His father, and grandfather, were part of a secret organization known as the Phoenix Resistance for thousands of years. They swore to protect the Secret of Atlantis – I can only imagine this would be the code we’re after. Perhaps through the ages they’ve lost it, or they never had it to begin with. Ultimately, I think they kidnapped Billie because they thought she could find it for them.”

“And you think they’ll bring Billie to Atlantis?”

“I’m certain of it. In fact, I doubt they even know where Atlantis is themselves. All we need to do is beat them to Atlantis. Find Atlantis, we find Billie, and if we can get her back alive, we’ll have the code.”

Up ahead, Sam heard the familiar whir of a couple Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk.

He looked at Tom. “We’ve got company.”

Tom nodded his head and prepared the remaining RPG to be fired.

“What is it?” the Secretary of Defense asked.

“We’ve got to go. We’ve got incoming. Sounds like a couple Sikorsky.”

The Secretary of Defense said, “Those are my birds on an extraction mission for you. Don’t you dare damage my hardware, or it will come out of your bank.”

“That’s the first bit of good news I think you’ve ever told me,” he said, while motioning to Tom to put the RPG down.

“I have a jet waiting to take you to JFK airport. I personally will meet you on the ground. We don’t have much time to pull this off!”

“Understood.” Sam thought about that celestial ceiling within Poseidon’s temple. Its purpose suddenly struck something in his mind. “Madam Secretary, there’s one more thing.”

“What?” her reply was curt.

“Contact the head of NASA’s Near Earth Object Program. It’s just a hunch, but I need to know if there’s anything large heading toward earth.”

Chapter Seventy-Four

Billie sat still. There was little of any use that she could do in her current position. She tried to force herself to relax long enough to sleep. She would need all her wits about her if she was going to beat Andrew when the opportunity arose. For nearly twenty-four hours he had kept moving her. Someone had bound her eyes tight with an impenetrable piece of leather, almost immediately afterward handcuffing her to a steel brace bar inside the helicopter. From the helicopter Billie was moved to a jet, most likely privately owned she guessed, because she heard no one else on it with the exception of the man who had taken her.

Andrew, if it was even him, had sat opposite her on the jet drinking something that smelled like rich cognac. Then after a few hours, the smell of his dinner became painful. It was roast beef with vegetables. She could imagine the look of gravy poured over the peas, carrots, and potatoes as she heard the man savoring each bite.

She had waited for him to speak, not wanting to provide him with the upper hand. He wanted her to feel helpless, she gathered. Billie had no intention of giving him such pleasure, so despite her hunger and being deprived the ability to piss, she remained silent. It was a game he was playing with her, but for what purpose she had no idea. He had not spoken a word to her since kidnapping her, when he simply told her that she would die, but first there were a few things he wanted her to clear up.

She could almost feel him staring at her. Enjoying her discomfort – waiting for her to get herself really fired up with the anxiety that overcame most people in her situation. He was savoring the moment, and she imagined him wanting to do something to provoke her, but carefully restraining his carnal desires. Delaying immediate gratification for something much greater – her complete supplication.

Well, she wouldn't be giving him that.

What's the worst thing he can do to me? Kill me. Okay, so he's already established that he's going to do that. Based on that, any way I can alter the outcome will be in my advantage. If I only have a day to live, it will be worth it to ruin his.

But what does he really need from me?

The answer came immediately to her head – *Power!* She doubted it was sexual. Already, she'd begun to feel like she knew the man. Edward had told her all about his past. He was a rich kid, given

money and power by his father. But he was also a Rhodes Scholar, which meant he was exceptionally astute. He was the head of an eleven-thousand-year old cult aimed at ensuring the secret of Atlantis reached its violent fruition. And that made him a fanatic. Even terrorists rarely carry on throughout multiple generations – but to maintain the desire to destroy humanity for eleven thousand years takes fanatical persistence. The more she thought about it, the less she believed what he desired was at all sexual.

No, he craves power and by the sounds of things gets off over it, the sick fuck. But that's not what he needs me for. I have something, or else he would have simply put two bullets in my head as he had the rest of the people on the ship.

Could he still need the code to Atlantis?

Edward! – Her thoughts quickly moved to the old man, and her heart slumped with the almost certain knowledge that he was now dead, his carcass most likely being eaten by crocodiles. They had all died. There was no reason why she should care more for him than anyone else. But he'd been kind to her. More than that – he had taken her under his wing as he would his own daughter. He never quite got around to explaining it to her, but she knew that the old man had a sad story with his own daughter.

She stopped herself having the luxury of self-pity, and returned quickly to the task of finding what Andrew was after.

So if Andrew already had the code to Atlantis, what did he want?

Could it be that he doesn't actually know where Atlantis is?

She dismissed the idea almost immediately.

No, he knows where it is. Mark would have had that information. Otherwise he would have already tried to find out from her where it was, instead of flying there.

Billie had no doubt that they were flying directly toward New York.

He's already been there! Which means – he's seen the challenges. He can't pass them! That's what he needs me for.

And that meant there was time... if only she could get a message to Sam Reilly.

The flight continued. It made a brief landing. From what she could gather, it was only to refuel. Her ears, now highly attuned to the sounds around her, noticed that the man who was watching her had stood up to stretch his legs.

She waited for a few minutes and then stood up herself.

Instantly she was punched in the gut. The force knocked the wind out of her lungs, and as her diaphragm went into a spasm, she struggled to take the next breath. Slowly she curled up, back in her seat.

Then, slowly gaining the ability to breathe again, Billie said, “I was going to the bathroom, you fuckwit!”

“So go,” the man replied with a laugh.

She hated to let the man have his way, but even so, it was a long flight to the U.S. and there was no way that she was going to hold it all that way.

Without speaking, she simply pissed on the man’s jet.

“The fucking bitch just wet herself!” the man said.

“Good.” It was the voice she’d associated with Andrew. “That means we’re almost ready to begin.”

Chapter Seventy-Five

Edward reached the shore with Zanzibe, the pygmy king. It was a long swim, over a mile, and at 80 years of age, he was probably in the one percent of his age bracket who could possibly do it. The fact that he didn't die of a heart attack during the swim only proved that the purpose that drove him was more valuable than his life. He could die soon, after he had performed his task, but not before.

"Thank you Zanzibe – I would not be here if you hadn't entered when you had."

"No. I know you're not one of them. You're not a god, but Dr. Swan is, isn't she?"

Edward nodded his head.

"And you're going to save her life!" the pygmy insisted.

"Me? How the hell do you expect me to do that? I'm in the middle of the Congo jungle, without anything, and they're in a helicopter, probably already boarding a plane to Atlantis. I want Andrew dead as much as you do, and I want to save Dr. Swan too, but I don't think it's possible. Hell, I don't even know how I'm going to get out of this jungle, let alone to New York."

"I will help you."

Edward laughed. "I hate to tell you this, but despite being the king of your little tribe, there is a really big world out here, and there's little that any of us can do to change it."

"I believe you're right, but all the same. I need you to save Dr. Swan's life – before the code to Atlantis is initiated, and your 'really big world' has a bad day."

"Okay, so how do we get out of the jungle from here?"

"Leave that to me."

The pygmy then started to call out in an ancient pygmy dialect sounding more like a bird's mating ritual than anything human. Within minutes it was answered.

Great – he speaks with the animals!

And then all went quiet in the jungle.

"What did they say?"

"They said they'd help you. Because it is important, not because they like you."

"Great. Which way do we walk?"

The pygmy pointed toward a small opening in the dense forest.
“There.”

Five minutes later the quietness of the jungled was interrupted by the sound of chopper blades spinning.

Edward grinned at the little native. “You ordered a helicopter?”

“Of course. And now, I’m coming with you, to make sure you don’t screw it up.”

Chapter Seventy-Six

JFK Airport – 12 Hours Remaining

Sam Reilly stepped off the plane. The presidential motorcade met him at the tarmac. A U.S. Marine in dress uniform held the door open for him. Sam casually stooped to get into the car. His father had financed the President's campaign. He wasn't intimidated by the man. If anything, he was relieved. If he was here, it meant that the Secretary of Defense had taken him seriously.

"Hello, Mr. President." Sam shuffled to the far side of the car, affectionately known as the Beast. Tom followed, and the door was shut immediately afterwards. They both shook the President's hand. Next to him sat the Secretary of Defense. Her red hair was tied back in a perfect, military bun. Sam considered if she really did have a permanent scowl, or if it was just an act when she spent time with him. Somehow, despite the anger in her eyes and displeasure every time she spoke with him, she was possibly the sexiest woman he'd ever met. That being the case, he could think of no one he'd less like to spend the evening with.

"Mr. Reilly, one day I would really like to know what you were doing looking into our long buried secrets from last century in Siberia. But if you're anything like your father I know I would be wasting my breath. For now, I need to know precisely how much time we have left?"

"On the Atlantis counter?"

"Yes, on the God damn Atlantis counter."

"A little under twelve hours," Sam replied. "Did you find what I asked for?"

"Yes. The original Costello map – we've just picked it up at the Smithsonian Institute. The oldest known map of Manhattan is now in your hands. Also, one of the curators there has found a series of engineering plans for the original water lots. We have more than a thousand of our people looking for that entrance now."

"Good." Sam picked up the delicate papers and began searching for what he needed. "Did the NASA's Near Earth Object Program find anything?"

The President answered. "No, they've reassured me, there's nothing that is in a direct collision course with us. Several that may come close, but if we were in danger, we'd have known about it by now."

“Did you send them the images of the celestial cavern we found in Poseidon’s temple?” Sam asked.

The Secretary of Defense said, “Yes, and they had a look at the comet that appears to be on its way toward earth. A Dr. James Bradley from their Near Earth Object Program assures me that nothing short of earth changing its gravitational pull would cause that stone to fall from the sky.”

“Get him on the phone now!” Sam replied.

“Why?” The President asked, the slightest of alarm in his voice. “He already said it’s going to narrowly miss earth’s orbit.”

“Because, let me guess, it will pass over head in around 12 hours’ time.”

The President nodded his head, realization striking him hard.

“Here, have a look at this.” Sam handed him the images he’d printed on the flight. “They’re celestial markings found inside Poseidon’s temple. At first they didn’t make any sense, but I just worked out what they are. They’re charts of comets that pass earth close enough to be pulled into our gravitational field. Atlantis somehow affects that pull, changing the direction of the comet from its original path.”

“Any chance we can take out that comet before it reaches us?” Tom suggested.

“Impossible.” The President’s answer was firm. “We have systems in place to destroy an extraterrestrial collision of this sort, but they would take months to put into effect. No, I suggest we now utilize our resources to making certain that no one activates Atlantis.”

Sam skimmed the construction notes for the water lots that were built in 1653 – the first of a series of land reclamations within the island of Manhattan. When his eyes reached a series of names – mostly the owners or companies who were building he stopped. “Okay, here it is. This one! It says the owner was a Mr. Felix Brandt.”

“Are you certain?” the President asked.

“Yes. Andrew Brandt is the one who we believe kidnapped Dr. Swan. There must be a connection somewhere. He needs something that Billie has – my guess, she managed to find the code to Atlantis.” Sam thought about it for a few seconds. “Okay, let them know it must be hiding in relatively plain sight. Dr. Billie Swan was there just five weeks ago. If she reached it on her own, then it means she hasn’t been doing any serious excavation, or your people would already know about it. We’re looking for somewhere that descends below that building.”

“There’s only one problem...” the President looked seriously at him.

“What?”

“That building was torn down in 1930.”

“It has to be that building! Why was it torn down?”

“To make way for the construction of the Bank of America Financial Center on the corner of Wall Street and Water.”

Sam looked at the Costello map, comparing it to where the modern day Bank of America Building rested. “Okay, I have it. Get me to that building. I know where those tunnels are. And I think I just worked out how Billie managed to find it so easily in the first place.”

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Sitting in wet cargo pants for the duration of the remaining flight would have been a small price to pay for the knowledge that she'd upset her captor, but his words, "Good, she is almost ready," seemed far more ominous.

The jet was still taxiing when someone grabbed her from behind and forced her to stand. Soon she'd discover exactly what Andrew needed from her before she died. The plane stopped moving, and she found herself walking down a series of steps, to where another chopper was waiting.

Fifteen minutes later, the helicopter landed. She was pulled out of it by a man who'd been waiting for her. The wind nearly knocked her off her feet. Below, a long way down, she could only just barely hear the cars honking their horns.

Well, that answered whether or not Andrew knows where Atlantis is – he'd taken her to the top of the Bank of America's Financial Center.

They walked her into a waiting elevator.

It dropped five stories before coming to a halt on the 18th floor. There, she felt a man's rough hands pull at her bound wrists, forcing her to step out. A man reeking of rich cologne swiped a key card to open up the bank's most secure elevator.

It was a security measure to make it more difficult to rob the bank's elite private vaults. Owners who utilized the bank's private security boxes, were forced to enter the lobby, take an elevator up to the 18th floor, where they would pass more security checks, before entering a completely different elevator – its elevator shaft completely separate to the rest of the elevators in the building. The elevator lowered nearly 45 stories below, taking them deep below the building, where a secret vault housed some of the world's most precious secrets and valuable items.

The secret vault was not made known to the general public. The bank offered a security deposit box system for its regular customers on an entirely different level. This secret vault had reached the same status as an ancient legend. A place where some of the most unique items from around the world, were stored for its absolute security.

Billie had only reached her conclusion to the location of Atlantis because she too held a safety deposit box in the secret vault. A place where she stored many of the artifacts and notes she'd obtained on her quest to complete what her grandfather started. Based on her

calculations from the looking glass within the Mayan pyramid, she'd determined the location of Atlantis as the corner of Wall Street and Water Street, New York. The second she saw it, she imagined the only place that such a secret could be maintained over the centuries.

The elevator came to an abrupt halt, and she was forced to step out. The temperature dropped several degrees. She recalled that the secret vault was maintained at an artificially lowered temperature to protect some of the older, more fragile, artifacts.

Still blindfolded, she was pushed toward the end of the room. Her hands were unbound, her head was pushed downwards, and she was forced inside a metallic tunnel. The smell of burnt waste still festered. She knew precisely where she was now.

Crawling slowly, she felt the sharp prick of a knife on her legs every time she stopped.

Climbing out the other side, she heard the tiny door behind her close with a metallic clank, followed by several turns of its security lock, like that of a submarine hatch.

Once in the ancient tunnel of Atlantis a man removed her blindfold for the first time since she'd been kidnapped from the deck of the Andre Sephora. A blond-haired man greeted her with a well-practiced, and disarming smile. He then carefully removed her gag. A curious grin on his face, it appeared as though he was fascinated by what she might say or do now.

When she said nothing, he displayed the resignation of a bully who'd been told that the child's mother was here now, and that he could no longer torment it.

"Now, Dr. Swan, I would like you to show me how to beat the challenges of Atlantis."

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Edward examined his little pygmy friend, Zanzibe.

He'd dressed the king in a Vivienne Westwood suit. Somehow, it transformed him from what looked like an albino child, to a rich, albeit very short businessman. The bank's security staff wouldn't dare take a second look at him, dressed as such. Zanzibe smiled his perfectly white teeth, sharpened to razor points.

Edward sighed. "Perhaps no smiling at anybody, my friend."

"Very good. No smiling."

"Okay, are you ready?"

"Yes, of course. I was born to protect Atlantis."

Fanaticism never ceased to amaze Edward. His friend had spent his entire life preparing for tonight's event. One look at the little pygmy, and he knew that the man would gladly give his life to protect the legacy of his Gods.

"All right. Let's do this."

It was early in the evening. The main bank was closed, but its secret vault never slept. The staff saw themselves as the divine custodians of some of the world's most precious items, and their owners could visit their secrets twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Edward drove up to the main gates in his own car. A security camera confirmed his details, and then opened the gates. He drove into the bank's underground security drive.

A valet immediately approached. "Welcome back Mr. Worthington. Will you be staying long?"

Edward handed him the keys and replied, "Perhaps an hour, thank you."

The vault offered an enforced valet service to reduce the risk of bank robbery, because the getaway car would be parked in a separate building's carpark. The night manager approached, and cordially greeted them. "Welcome back Mr. Worthington."

Edward shook the manager's hand and said, "This is Mr. Zanzibe. My friend from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who I told you about. As you can imagine, he needs to store some of his better discoveries."

The bank manager nodded his head. And he did know, too. The DROC was synonymous with the best quality diamonds in the world

as well as corruption. One look at Zanzibe, and he instantly would have imagined a tribal man who'd found the ultimate blood diamond. "Of course, right this way, gentlemen."

The valet disappeared with Edward's Audi, and then the three men entered the elevator. It went up to the 18th floor. There, the pygmy had the retinas of his eyes and his fingertips scanned, followed by a DNA sample. He chose a password involving a combination of 42 letters, numbers and accented characters.

Zanzibe was given his safe deposit box number. The two men then stepped into the elevator and began their descent into one of the most protected vaults on earth.

Edward said, "Now, they advised me that the last occupants down here left thirty minutes ago. But for that to be true, it would mean that Andrew had already won."

"Perhaps, my friend, he has?" Zanzibe replied.

"No, that's not possible. Because if he had, none of this would still be here. It's more likely that he had someone else sign him out of the vault. You might want to prepare yourself, in case we have company when this elevator comes to a stop."

"I will be prepared."

Edward looked next to him, where Zanzibe had already put together his two Uzis. His sharpened teeth glistened like a banshee. And then the elevator doors opened.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Billie studied the first of the three challenges with intensity. She already knew the answers to all three, but now had a much greater contest to overcome. Inside Poseidon's temple, the Sphere of Atlantis waited eagerly to release its evil power of destruction. The time was narrowing, and soon she must act to overpower her captor.

It was always a game, but now the price of the challenges was no longer merely her life. Now, failure meant the end of the human race. She considered simply refusing to beat the challenges at all, but with the Sphere of Atlantis already poised, Billie had to reach it with the code if she wanted to stop it.

No, she would have to reach the inner sanctum. But somewhere along the way, Andrew Brandt must die.

The first room involved the challenge of Strength, with its long tunnel and descending roofline, filled with spikes, Billie quickly wondered if Andrew would be naive enough to wish to go through first. She watched as Andrew studied the mechanism that lifted the roof by maneuvering the cantilever. He lifted it up so that the roof levelled, revealing the half opened exit at the end of the long tunnel, and then slowly lowered it again.

The spikes dropped like a machete.

He grinned at her wickedly. "I guess I better let you through first. Then you can open up for me?"

"Why, don't you think you're strong enough to work it out on your own?"

"Of course not, that's why I went to great lengths to bring you here, Dr. Swan. Now, in case you get the urge to keep running once you're on the other side, may I remind you that only I hold the code to Atlantis."

Andrew stared at her.

His piercing gray eyes tormented her indecision.

When she didn't respond, he said, "And that means that this building and everything within it is going to be levelled within the next two hours."

"And if I help you get through. Then what?"

"Then I win, and you lose."

"But we all die anyway?"

"No, you die, everyone else dies, but I have all the power that

comes with the Sphere of Atlantis and its access code.”

“Doesn’t sound very fair to me,” Billie pointed out.

He sighed. “No, I dare say it’s not very fair. But hey, so long as you and I are together, perhaps you’ll find your chance to win. I doubt it, but it’s the best hope you’ve got, isn’t it?”

She turned to show him her hands were still bound behind her back.

“I’m going to need these off if you want me to make it through the challenge.”

“I’d really rather I didn’t.”

“Then I guess we may as well both lie down here and die. You see, halfway up the tunnel, a lever needs to be pulled to open the final exit. If I can’t reach it, I can hardly help you reach your all powerful sphere.”

He grabbed her forcefully. Placing his knee into the nape of her neck, he removed the handcuffs that bound her. She quickly stretched her arms and moved them to her front. A second later, Andrew clipped them again.

“There. Now you should be able to reach the lever, but still less likely to pick up a rock and beat my skull in.”

She smiled with a meekness that she would never truly feel. “Okay, let’s see how strong you are then.”

Within minutes, Billie passed the first challenge and having reset the lever so that Andrew could follow her, was now studying the second one. This one involved choosing the correct weight to place on the pedestal. Instead of the gold ingots of the Congo temple, this one had bars of solid orichalchum. Each one glowed red in response to their dim flashlights, sending shards of red into the dark chasm blocking their progression.

She stood there considering how to overcome the challenge and get her captor killed in the process. And then Andrew began picking up the ingots and the weights and piling them on the ancient balancing scales. Within two to three minutes, he laughed and carried several of the bars of orichalchum over to the pedestal.

Without asking her if he had chosen correctly, Andrew dropped them.

The pedestal glowed red, and seconds later the hidden bridge swung into position.

“That was lucky, wasn’t it? I guess I might not have needed you after all?”

Chapter Eighty

Sam Reilly arrived at the entrance to the Bank of America on the corner of Wall Street and Water. The building by this stage was swarming with police officers. He stepped out of the car, armed with an M16 machine gun in his hands and a Glock strapped to his left thigh. Tom followed behind with similar armament. In the foyer, the night manager of the vault stood arguing with the senior police officer on scene.

“Good evening, sir.” Sam shook the man’s hand. “My name is Sam Reilly, and this is one of my associates, Tom Bower. Have you been briefed on the situation?”

“My name is Mitchel Sawyer. I’m the night manager of the vault, and no one gets in or out unless they are a current customer of the bank. And I’m afraid none of you are on the list.’

Sam gritted his teeth before he spoke. “Mr. Sawyer, in under an hour, you and just about every other living being on this planet are going to have a really bad fucking ending to their day, unless we stop a madman from committing the ultimate act of terrorism.”

“I’m most sorry to hear that sir, but I’m afraid the vault has very specific rules. In fact, it’s protected by a number of laws, expressly prohibiting you from barging in here like this.”

Sam pulled out his phone and handed it to the man. “I hope this man can talk some semblance of sanity into you before I have to kill someone.”

The man straightened up at the threat, and then took the cell phone.

“Who is it?”

“Just pick up the phone, and you will see.”

The night manager spoke into the cell. “Hello?”

He nodded his head.

Then began trying to explain the system again, before suddenly handing the phone back. Sam took the cell and said, “Mr. President.”

He grinned.

“Of course, Mr. President. I’ll do that.”

The bank manager began to protest again that he really didn’t want to go against the President of the United States of America, but his first duty was to his customers.

Sam stuffed the nozzle of his Glock into the man’s throat.

“I’m sorry Mr. Sawyer. You must have misunderstood me. I said, we need to get into the vault – right now!”

Within ten minutes Sam and Tom were descending the elevator into the vault – alone. Both men removed the safeties from their M16 machine guns.

“From what we know about this guy, he’ll have the entrance to this thing well-guarded.”

Tom rested his finger on the trigger.

And the elevator door opened.

Sam grinned as he saw the vault, where at least ten people lay dead. Each had been massacred by heavy machine gun fire. “On second thoughts, we might not be the only ones interested in this guy.”

“No Sam, it appears you’re going to have to wait in line.” Tom scanned the room, which was now covered in blood. “Whoever beat us here came well prepared and heavily armed. But the question remains, where did they go?”

“That part’s easy.”

“Really? Where?”

Sam walked up to the incinerator and said, “Right here.” It was shaped like the head of a giant crocodile. Like all good storage places of valuable secrets, the vault housed a large incinerator, which its clients could use to remove the evidence of any unwanted truths. The red metal of orichalcum shined like the devil.

“How did you know?” Tom asked.

“Billie once brought me here. Many years ago. She told me that her grandfather, who was searching for an ancient civilization, used this vault to store all his information on it. The image of the incinerator was so unique that although I didn’t know where to place it, I recognized it inside Poseidon’s temple.”

Tom poked his head inside the incinerator. It still smelled like burnt residue. “A nice place to hide the entrance to an ancient city. After all, who would want to willingly enter an incinerator?”

Chapter Eighty-One

Billie followed Andrew as he casually walked across the bridge. It swung gently as they traversed it, but nowhere near enough for her to get the advantage required to somehow throw him off. On the other side they crawled through yet another tunnel, which opened up to the third and final challenge – the test of bravery.

Nearly forty stone pillars stood precariously above a deep ravine. Below which, one could see nothing but darkness. At first glance it would be impossible to jump from each stone to the next all the way across the chasm.

Billie stood there, watching, but refusing to show the way.

“My dear Dr. Swan. I’d like to say that we can wait all day, but to tell you the truth...” Andrew glanced at his watch, “we have just under twenty minutes.”

“All right. See those three white stone pillars?” she asked.

“I see them.”

“Good, the long gap between the second and third are merely illusions. The dark ground below is the best disguise.”

Andrew grinned at her. “You first, Doctor.”

“Okay, but I need my hands untied. You have a gun, and you’re at least twice my size, so what are you worried about?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Why do you need your hands to jump across some rocks?”

“Because I need a run off to do so, and I’ll never make it without the full swing of my hands.”

“I don’t care if you don’t make it.”

“Sure, suit yourself. I’ll just wait here and watch you try and jump it.”

Andrew studied the gap. The optical illusion was nearly perfect. Then he stepped up to her with a knife in his hand and shoved it inside the handcuff’s locking mechanism. The cheap lock cracked under the pressure.

Billie lifted her hands slowly. “Thanks.”

He nodded to her, pointing his gun. “Now it’s your turn. Go!”

She turned and ran into the chasm, stepping from one stone to the next until she came to a complete stop. There she stared down at the dark ravine. She picked up a pile of white sand and threw it out

into the black expanse.

Instantly, a hidden path, no wider than a person's foot, could be seen wandering across the remaining 11 or more feet to the other side. Instead of being a straight beam, the secret path snaked around the room, so that no one could simply guess it was there. It was made from an alloy. Unlike the Atlantean's unique alloy orichalcum which reflected light majestically, whatever material they had built the secret path with absorbed all light. She carefully stepped foot in front of foot until she reached the other side.

"Now your turn," she said.

Andrew carefully stepped from one stone tower to the next. As with everything she'd seen him do, he appeared confident and surefooted. By the time he'd reached the precipice just before the secret path, she felt the soft ground below her sink. It was dark, and despite shining her flashlight directly on it, the ground seemed to disappear.

She watched as Andrew took his first couple steps onto the hidden path. And then she reached down and picked up a handful of the dirt, throwing it directly at him. The dust blackened the entire secret path, along with the stepping stones leading onto it, leaving Andrew to remain floating high above the chasm.

"My dear Dr. Swan, are you not forgetting that only I am carrying the code to Atlantis?"

Billie forced herself to smile. "I was thinking of a trade. Throw me your bag, and I'll throw some more white sand."

"I have a better idea. How about I just retrace your steps." Andrew then slowly stepped forward, into oblivion.

Billie looked around the room for anything to use as a weapon, but with the exception of the Sphere, the place was barren.

Andrew laughed at her concern. "Did I not mention that I have the good fortune of a photographic memory?" To prove his point, he then skipped along the wandering secret path.

He then walked toward the Sphere of Atlantis. It glowed blue in anticipation. Andrew expertly touched and rearranged several of its ancient symbols, changing them from blue to red. He worked quickly, and like a man who had been born to work on such a machine. Unlike Billie and Edward, who had only ever been merely guessing at the purpose of the ancient and complex machine, Andrew appeared to intrinsically know what it wanted. As though it were alive, and it was waiting for him.

Billie approached slowly. "What are you doing, Andrew?"

“That’s close enough, Dr. Swan,” he said, raising his handgun toward her. “If you must know, I’m changing the course of history for humanity.”

Chapter Eighty-Two

Andrew looked down at the sudden pain in his arm.

He didn't even see the ancient knife. He could only guess that she'd picked it up from where it had been buried inside the mysterious darkening alloy. Taking a deep breath, the adrenaline sent him into a frenzy of rage. Before he could come to any real understanding of what had just happened, Dr. Swan had charged at his gun with a force that did her lithe frame injustice.

The gun went flying from his hand, landing on the floor. In an instant, he ducked to grab it and Dr. Swan brought her knee up to his jaw. Dazed, his fingers gripped the weapon. He pulled it up to shoot her, but before his hand could move, she'd kicked it so hard that it broke a number of his fingers and sent the weapon flying.

He turned to race for it. Already, she had begun pressing several of the symbols on the sphere. It glowed black with disapproval.

"You fucking bitch!" Andrew swore. "What have you done?" He then elbowed her hard in her face. She dropped to the floor, barely conscious.

Edward stepped into the massive cavern, quickly and with growing confidence he moved in, to pick up the Glock. Without saying a word, he pulled the trigger.

Andrew heard the two shots fire.

Then he felt the burning sensation in his chest.

Taking a deep breath, he heard the gurgle of blood in his lungs. He slid to the floor, an aghast look of despair on his face. His confidence now changed to sorrow and loss. He wasn't worried, just disappointed.

Dr. Swan was quick to retrieve her knife and hold it close on his throat. The thought made him want to laugh.

Didn't she realize he was mortally wounded?

Andrew tried to speak, but the knife made it difficult. Still, he tried. She had to know the truth.

Edward started to enter symbols on the sphere. "Quick Dr. Swan – the code! Tell me you have the code to Atlantis!"

"Yes. Here."

Andrew tried to move, but she withdrew her tablet and tossed it toward Edward.

"It's all on there," Dr. Swan said.

“Good work. I knew I could trust you!”

Dr. Swan yelled. “Edward, I can’t believe you’re alive! How did you survive?”

“It’s a long story, but for now, I need to enter the code.”

The blue sphere glowed radiantly as Edward began quickly inputting the code. When the final image was inputted, the sphere began to rotate on its axis. A shining blue light reaching toward the ceiling.

“What the hell have you done?” It was the pygmy who spoke with vitriolic rage. “You were supposed to bury Atlantis properly, not activate it!”

Edward smiled, pulled the pistol out again and shot the pygmy dead with a bullet straight to his head. “Sorry little king. I lied.”

“What the fuck have you done?” Billie cursed.

“Indeed, I am very sorry,” Edward said. “I neglected to mention that I’m part of the Phoenix Resistance. All I’m doing is making the world right again. Andrew, you were supposed to activate it! I knew that your lavish lifestyle would make you weak. Greedy, you were most likely trying to determine where if you could reprogram it to destroy parts of Manhattan only – making my investment in high altitude real estate worth a fortune to you.”

Andrew tried to reply, but couldn’t.

Billie looked up at him. “But it was already activated. The code was supposed to deactivate it!”

“Yes, well you were very gullible, weren’t you? What did you think was happening? That you had walked in here, touched some things and triggered a cataclysmic event? No, I’ve tried for nearly fifty years to get my hands on the code to Atlantis, and only you have been able to give it to me. So thank you. It’s a real shame that we’re all going to die.”

Chapter Eighty-Three

Sam fired three short bursts from his M16 and the machine gun sprayed Edward Worthington before he could finish his next sentence. He and Tom then quickly crossed the secret path over the dark ravine.

“How much time have we got?” he asked.

“About five minutes,” Billie replied.

Letting go of Andrew, she began examining the sphere again.

Sam looked at the code and then at the sphere. “Can you deactivate it?”

“I have no idea. I mean, it must be possible, but I wouldn’t have a clue how.”

Andrew began to move. His face was white with sweat beads. Blood frothed at his mouth as he exhaled.

Sam stepped toward him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Andrew tried to speak, but the bubbling blood in his lungs made it difficult to hear what he was trying to say.

Sam grabbed him and tried to listen closely. “What is it?”

In barely an audible whisper, Andrew replied, “I can stop it.”

“Why should we trust you? You’ve spent the last five weeks trying to get me killed. We know that you were the leader of the Phoenix Resistance.”

Andrew spoke again, but no one could hear his words.

Billie stepped in. “Because I have no idea how to stop this thing, and the timer is now displaying two minutes!”

They helped him to stand next to the sphere. It glowed positively with him. As though he’d been rejuvenated by the ancient sphere, Andrew began rapidly working with his hands along the myriad of symbols.

Billie looked at him. The wounds to his chest were now almost entirely gone. “Who are you?”

His disarming smile returned, and Andrew said, “My name’s Andrew Brandt, and I have waited nearly two hundred years to infiltrate the Phoenix Resistance and protect the sphere of Atlantis.”

Sam grabbed his arm. Previously badly wounded by Billie’s knife, it was now almost entirely healed. “That’s impossible. No one lives that long.”

“You’re right. It is impossible,” Andrew replied, like a creature

from beyond our reality. “If you want to live, I suggest you both leave now.”

“What are you going to do?” Billie asked.

“I’m sending Atlantis where it will be protected for another thousand years.”

He entered the code to Atlantis and the Sphere glowed blue. He held on to two specific symbols. Sam had studied them before, but had never truly worked out what their purpose was. Literally, one translated to life, while the other, death.

The ground began to shake and small stress fractures slowly reached up toward the ceiling of the massive cavern.

Tom looked at the large crack in the wall. “Sam, Billie. It’s time to go, the roof’s going to come down soon.”

“We’re right behind you.”

Sam stopped at the edge of the chasm and glanced at Andrew once more. His eyes were alive, and he appeared happy – finally in possession of the greatest power on earth.

Chapter Eighty-Four

Billie was the first to slide through the incinerator and back into the vault. She pressed the button for the elevator. Her large brown eyes appeared larger, if that was even possible, while they waited.

“Sam, do you realize what this means?” she asked.

“Billie, I just watched a man virtually return from the dead because he touched a blue sphere, and now, the entire building is collapsing beneath us. So, no. I have no idea what any of this means!”

“Think about it. What if the Master Builders were the only survivors of the great flood who maintained the full knowledge of the technologies of Atlantis?”

“And why did they of all people retain the knowledge, when others joined their fellow hunter gathers in the mountains and survived?” Tom asked.

“What if the reason they maintained the knowledge was they were immortal?”

Sam stepped into the elevator. “That’s impossible.”

“They were Gods! The ones the ancient Atlanteans worshiped. Poseidon was a god. They were immortal.”

“That’s impossible.”

“No. Everything’s impossible until it has been done. Just because no one’s ever heard of it, doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Yes it does. That’s exactly what it means. It’s made up.”

“But it would answer everything. We know that the Master Builders were just a few super intelligent people, who used armies of men to build their great works. How could the same person build the pyramids if they didn’t live forever?”

“You’re talking about legends, the Holy Grail – nothing more.”

“Yes, but today we stepped inside Atlantis, entered an ancient code that was otherwise planning on sending a comet hurtling toward earth.”

“Okay, so we’ve had an unusual day. For now, I will accept that there’s a possibility they lived a much longer life than what we know of. Andrew told us that he spent nearly 200 years trying to infiltrate the Phoenix Resistance, but that’s a long way off saying they were Gods.”

“Okay, but it’s worse than that.”

“What’s worse than that?”

“If what we think is true, then the Master Builders are still around. That means they’re here, in our time. Weaving their Machiavellian webs of purpose, but for what ultimate desire, or where, we have no idea.”

Sam had another cold shiver down his spine.

“That thought’s really going to send terror through the heart of the Secretary of Defense.”

Outside the elevator a blue glow had encompassed the building. The entire structure shook for a couple minutes and then the light and vibrations stopped completely.

Billie looked at her feet. They had finally stopped moving. “It’s over. Atlantis is gone.”

Chapter Eighty-Five

Sam looked over to see the Secretary of Defense. She was on her phone – most likely giving the President her account of the events. She hung up and walked toward them.

“I suppose a thank you is in order.” It was as close as the Secretary of Defense had ever come to thanking him for his services. “You must know that the events of the past five weeks must be buried as deep as Atlantis. As for our involvement in it, we will deny everything. And Russia will continue to stay out of it. Any public appreciation would be out of the question.”

“Of course.” He smiled at her. Sam wondered how much her appearance of disliking him was a pretense. She smiled back. It was almost seductive in its array of meanings. Somehow, while he’d let his guard down on the pretense of flirtation, she had sensed his reticence.

She smiled pervasively at him. The way a beautiful woman knew to seduce any information out of a man. He couldn’t stand the woman, but there was no denying she was insatiably beautiful. Her coy, flirtatious smile ended abruptly, as though she’d seen straight through him. Back to her normal, arrogant self, she said, “You learned something, didn’t you?”

“About Atlantis?” He smiled. “No, only more questions. But seeing as your organization is in the business of plausible denial, I won’t try and interrogate you for their answers.”

“Not about Atlantis. You made an unexpected discovery about the Master Builders, didn’t you?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not.”

Sam had been introduced to one of the greatest theories about the Master Builders since he’d first heard of their existence. It would change everything about the future, but he would be damned if he was going to tell her what he’d learned before he found some proof. Even he thought Billie’s explanation was fanciful, at best.

Chapter Eighty-Six

Sam sat down on the balcony of his father's Fifth Avenue Penthouse overlooking one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Tom poured a glass of champagne for everyone. Billie took a glass and so did Matthew, Sam's skipper of the Maria Helena, who had flown in that night to celebrate.

Holding his own glass up high, Sam said, "A toast, to the human race. May we learn from our mistakes, so that we gain the right to survive."

They each drank quickly.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Sam asked, staring at Billie.

"You and I both know where I have to go," she replied.

"Where?" Tom asked.

"If the ancient Master Builders really were immortal, it would finally explain some of the research that my grandfather did. I have to return to one of the earliest archeological sites I ever visited – to a place my grandfather took me when I was just a little girl. And then I have to complete what he started."

"So you're leaving us again?" Matthew said.

"I'm afraid so. But don't worry. When I have the answers that I'm looking for, I'll call your boss for some help. Sam, I've saved your ass enough times over the past decade. One of these days, I'm going to call in that favor, and you and Tom are going to help me complete this thing."

Sam poured another glass, drank it, and then replied, "I'm looking forward to the day that we both have answers on that account."

The night carried on, and the four of them consumed far more alcohol than any of them intended. Finally, Sam looked at Matthew and said, "Tell me Matthew, what's happened?"

Matthew shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"I know you. There's little that would make you leave your beloved ship, the Maria Helena, alone for more than a few hours, let alone an entire twenty-four of them. I appreciate you've come here to celebrate, but in all the time I've known you, you've never once sat down and had a glass of anything with me until tonight. So, now I ask again, what's happened?"

Matthew's face flushed. "There's been another rogue wave."

"Any casualties?"

"Yes, another ship – the Global Star."

"That makes three of my father's liners this month? He must be ropable. I'm surprised he hasn't called to tell me to fix it." Sam stopped and looked at Matthew's expression. "Christ, he sent you to retrieve me, didn't he?"

"Yes. He's lost three of his ships."

"But the weather's been good."

"That's just it, Sam... rogue waves occur out of complete randomness. There's no way to predict when one will strike. On average, every 4th wave is one and a half times the median height of the waves in an area, whereas every 16th is double. However, only one out of every 800,000 is a rogue wave, described as more than ten times the median wave height."

Sam nodded his head. He was mildly inebriated and he'd heard the science of rogue waves previously. "So what? Rogue waves occur randomly in nature."

"And yet three have occurred within the Bermuda Triangle in the past month. The shipping captains have started to complain its bad luck; the insurance companies are crying fraud; and I'm afraid something much more sinister is happening."

Sam thought about it for a moment before replying. "You have any idea what the hell might be causing that, Tom?"

"Not a clue. If it was hurricane season, or something, maybe. But there's currently no severe weather warnings on the forecast."

"Okay, I'm away for a few days. I promised Aliana we'd go somewhere far from the ocean. Then I suggest we take the Maria Helena for a cruise into Bermuda in hunt of whatever's creating these artificial rogue waves, and put a stop to it. . ."

The End

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